Sevens
V13 - It Wouldn't Be Strange if a Useless Guy Popped into the Family by Now, Thirteenth Generation

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Prologue

… Upon receiving a report from his subordinates, Blois Cadel sighed.

His office was a little more in order than it had been before, and his temporary rule was going forward without a problem.

The land that perished before the legions of monsters had been under Bahnseim's rule for a good few months now.

Within all that, the one temporarily taking command of it was a man named【Blois Cadel】. He boasted curling, short brown hair, and while he had an atmosphere from which one wouldn't feel much motivation, he had the caliber to be promoted to general at the very heart of Bahnseim.

The contents plaguing him was the negotiations with their new neighbor Beim.

Looking over the documents, Blois put his eyes through the report he had just received.

"Even if it may be temporary, a four-country alliance was formed. Did they think there wouldn't be many wars for a while, or are they turning their coffers to Bahnseim this time… those merchants of death sure are scary."

Zayin, Lorphys, Galleria, and Rusworth… from Bahnseim's point of view, they were just small countries. But having gotten together, they had formed an alliance on a scale that couldn't be ignored.

Here and there on all the pages, the name【Lyle Walt】was written in.

“… I had heard there had been a driven-out brother, but he sure moves flashily. Even if he were irrelevant, I wonder how those merchants will use him.”

Thinking over all that, Blois felt his head was going to ache. The reason he’d gone through all the trouble of volunteering to be stationed at such a remote place, spending day after day chased after by work, was merely because he had noticed abnormalities at the capital, and had headed for the hills.

But what would the queen-to-be say if she caught wind of this information?

Neglect?

Or assassination?

His inability to predict it was because Blois knew of Celes’ whimsy. For every time she would cut down the opposition without mercy, there were times where she’d spend long months getting them to yield to her.

At present with the king, queen, the crown prince, and the powerful Walt House behind her, there wasn’t a soul who could go against her.

If you opposed, your territory would be trampled down. With the example kindly demonstrated, the feudal lords kept their mouthes shut.

“It really is a detestable time. I’m starting to see some relative truth in those tales of that beautiful courtesan all those years ago.”

Troubled as he was, Blois still had the obligation to report.

Leaving the reports and such on his desk, he looked up at the ceiling, and rubbed the corners of his eye with a fingertip.

“At Bahnseim’s main territory… negotiations in Centralle, huh?”

Beim was attempting to begin full-blown negotiations with Bahnseim…

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In a room of the mansion in Beim, I covered a cover up past my head, wriggling on the bed in agony.

“It’s not my fault, it’s not my fault, it’s not my fault…”

The reason I was cowering to such an extent lay in how a four-country treaty was officially tied, formally forming an alliance. Without an official name, it was currently an agreement passed on a business relations level, but perhaps it would be fitting to say things were going favorably.

Galleria and Rusworth asserted the formation of an engagement between me and their representatives.

Zayin and Lorphys delivered documents requesting an explanation.

But that wasn’t the main problem.

It was also a problem, but it was already a fact, so it couldn’t be undone. What I was focusing on most was the Jewel.

It wasn’t near the bed, but on the desk. And yet, I could hear the voice up-close.

『… I… wanna see garters.』

LYLE spoke. Following his words, the post-Growth me had told everyone to prepare garters. What’s more, I even put out the condition that they be ones that excited me.

Just how much better would it have been if they had gotten angry at me there? If it ended with their anger at that point, that would have been the end of the matter.

From the Jewel, I heard Milleia-san’s bubbly voice. That woman was still holding a grudge at how she couldn’t see my post-Growth state.

I think she’s definitely the type that gets vindictive if you make her mad.

『Lyle, you must keep you promises. Look, let’s go and see the

undergarments everyone bought for you already. Don't be embarrassed. Some of them were custom ordered, oh I just can't wait~.』

They could've just angrily refused, but instead, they all gathered together, discussed it a bit, returned to Beim, and put in requests to Monica and the other automatons.

When shopping, they were told to put in as much zeal as if they were specially ordered… definitely to spite me.

Because he never thought they would accept, there was no helping that LYLE's tensions were especially high.

『I also think stockings are nice.』

That opinion was approved by the Third.

『Preach it.』

I felt a presence before the door…

"Eeek!"

… I cried out.

Aria was on the other side of the door. Did she plan to get back for having to run all over the battlefield looking for me?

『Now get out there, Lyle. You want to see undergarments, don't you? They went to the trouble of preparing, so go look at it for them. On with it~.』

Knowing I would run away, Aria was going to gleefully drive me into a corner.

"I-I'm not quite up for it today, so how about tomorrow…"

From the Jewel, the ancestors talked smack about Aria's course of action. The Third even…

『She just doesn't get it. It's the embarrassment that's key here. Aria-chan, you may be trying to get back at him, but you're not enticing in the slightest.』

The Fifth sounded uninterested, however…

『… Rather than undergarments, can't we get some more clothing for May?』

The Seventh let out a sigh.

『This is why adventurers are… learn some shame, why don't you?』

And I was the one who wanted to run from the embarrassment. Knowing it would come to this, everyone had purposely prepared for this day.

Aria was going on a strong offense, knowing I wouldn't hazard a glance down. It was vexing, but from my embarrassment, she was probably right.

The usual Aria aside, when it came to the other members… imagining it turned my face red, and I began feeling annoyed at Aria, coming to rile me up on the other side of the door.

『When she went so far to prepare them? I see, so you don't wanna see. You spoke of your love for undergarments with such zeal, yet it was but a lie~.』

The one so zealous about them was the post-Growth me.

He had ordered everyone to wear ones that would make him want to see. Getting embarrassed about it later, I became conscious of it, but using it as a reason, the female camp was incessantly attacking me.

That's why… it wasn't my fault. Yet LYLE…

『Woohoo! But after she's insisting so hard for you to look, I want to stare straight at her, scoff, and make her embarrassed instead! The flushed face of the usually violent Aria… I think it's a yes!』

He was all on board.

… Fidel Trēs was happily reading a document in his estate.

He put his eyes through the paper that had come to his office, and thinking of his incoming income, he felt as if he couldn't turn off his smile.

"Nice. I was reluctant to invest in that gigolo, but the formation of a four-country alliance will give more meaning to the ports. Constructing them will take time and money, but when they're done, considering a usage fee… I'll be able to reclaim my investment within ten years. It was a good thing I ordered those new ship models. The Trēs House is sure to grow even larger in my generation."

Preparing ports on two countries with coasts, his monopolization of their use was already recognized.

The authority of the Trēs House in Beim, the city of merchants, was sure to rise. And even if the formation of an alliance decreased the need for war, it made it so he could make it by on other enterprises.

It wasn't a problem to the Trēs House at all.

"That damn gigolo, his ability is splendid, if nothing else. I don't want to admit it, but he's capable. If only he didn't trick Vera, we would've made great partners… wait!? What was I just…! Damn, this must also be his trap or something!"

If his daughter hadn't been involved, he would be perfect, of so Fidel said as he returned to his work…

❼

… Somewhere in Beim.

There, the merchants and Guild executives gathered to talk.

They were the ones profiting off of war, and had gathered together for the profits of all parties.

In a narrow room, different from usual. The representative merchants and the guild top brass discussed.

“A Trēs House monopoly on the ports of two countries? It will get even more difficult for we, their opposition.”
“A four-way alliance… it would be troublesome if war went down.”
“Then just sell them to the adventurers. The adventurers will buy the weapons. But the problem is the mercenaries.”
“If they’ve no work, can’t they just defeat monsters?”
“That level isn’t enough to maintain a brigade. About that Labyrinth Subjugation we sent around to them, it didn’t create much of a profit at all.”

While one party had benefited greatly from Lyle, there were others who had not. There were plenty of mercenary brigades who would be troubled by the lack of war nearby.

Because they would need to change their base of operations. If they thought they couldn’t earn money in Beim, they would immediately leave the city. But there was a reason Beim wanted to detain the brigades there.

Beim was a special territory.

A majority of its war potential came from its adventurers and mercenaries. In such a situation, having the mercenary numbers go down was a troubling story. And it wasn’t just a tale of ten or twenty percent.

If played poorly, only ten or twenty percent may remain. In that case, the number of people who would issue requests would go down, so it was an issue the Adventurer Guild South Branch couldn’t let be.

“It’s Lyle. I don’t think leaving that brat to his own devices would be the best course of actions.”
“… I hate to admit it, but he’s a national hero. Putting hands on him will become an international problem. And before we could do anything, the talks of that defensive battle spread around. If something happens, they’ll think we did it.”
“That brat! Spreading rumors, it’s as if he’s making us out as the villains! He’s the one who said he’s take on the job! And he only brought up talks for reinforcements once. He returned without even trying to negotiate!”

“And so the rumors have come that we abandoned him. But fact is fact. The rumors hold no lies.”

The gathered members thought of Lyle with detestable sentiment. There was no doubt in the fact Lyle was the hero who saved the city of Beim, so doing something to him would raise a problem.

Within all that, a single Guild executive.

“The one in Bahnseim backed by her House, Celes Walt… future queen of the crown prince, but it seems she’s considerably cruel. Civil wars continue to rage on within the country of Bahnseim. And she’s the blood sister of that very Lyle Walt. Can we not make use of this?”

Hearing that, everyone showed light reactions only akin to a brief, ‘you’re not wrong’.

“Happens sometimes. Well, it’s also the time for us to earn some money. Weapons fly off the shelves, and other things sell as well. But can we use him?”
“The mercenaries are already starting off towards Bahnseim. Is there no way to stop them? At this rate, there will be a chip in Beim’s military might.”

The Guild executive. Head of the South Branch gave a slight smile as he spoke.

“It’s because Lyle’s here that Bahnseim is glaring at us. That’s all you have to say. Let’s leak some rumors. And present Lyle to Celes.”

The other faces gathered.

“We’ve thought over that before, but the boy was exiled. Does presenting him at this point truly hold any meaning?”

“We need only say he has the intentions to oppose. If you tell them the alliance in question was forged for that purpose, there’s no way Bahnseim can leave him be.”

The alliance was a gathering of small countries. But brought

together, they had as large a power as the addition of their parts. It was true he could move a force of twenty to thirty thousand troops, and if he pushed it, he could mobilize some times that amount.

Those there looked around, and nodded amongst themselves.

"… He's a gotten a little too high on his horse, is how it is. But starting with the Trēs House, a large number of merchants have come to invest in him as well. If they put up opposition, forcing this talk passed will be difficult."

"… It's possible. About the Trēs House, they've been overdoing themselves a little as of late. Even increasing their lineup of new-model ships, on top of pouring quite some aid into the last war of Galleria and Rusworth. The Trēs House head is soft on his family, so he wouldn't think his daughter would move."

Hearing that, everyone's eyes turned to the South Branch head for further explanation.

There was a possibility it would lead to large movements throughout Beim.

The South Branch executive spoke delightedly.

"It's about Gina Trēs. She said if it would make her lover the head, she wouldn't mind jumping on board, and driving out the father. Good grief, merchant daughters sure are scary."

Everyone, upon hearing that name, knew only of rumors of a love across status. And thinking over whether she would really go that far, on the contrary, they started making delighted faces.

"Very well. If that's the extent to which she uses her head, taking control of her should be a simple task."
"Convenient daughters are quite an asset to us. We must give our blessings to her wedding. Shall we send some congratulatory gifts?"
"That's also nice, but make the preparations. Given the occasion. Let's use this chance to drive the Trēs House's faction out of Beim."

Talks proceeded forward.

Lyle was on the verge of losing a large backer in Beim…

Gina Trēs

… Gina waited for her sister Vera, who had returned to the house from the harbor.

Calling her out, saying there was something important to discuss, she prepared a room to talk with Vera alone. That room that was usually used for negotiations with visitors was rarely ever made use of by the sisters.

And having called Vera to such a place, Gina touched her red hair and stared at her sister as she spoke.

With the start of the sun's set, the room was growing a little dim.

"Vera, I'll be blunt. Could you stop giving money to that person already? It isn't just your problem alone."

On her younger sister Gina's words, Vera parted a cup from her mouth.

"… This isn't by father's orders, right? What's gotten into you so late in the game? And I haven't gone as far as to lay a hand on the Trēs House's assets, you know."

Gina cut down and discarded that opinion.

"As long as you back him, it makes it look like the Trēs House is backing him! What's more, father is moving around a large sum… there are some of our own who are starting to feel anxious. Increasing the number of ships, and getting into port construction…"

Vera narrowed her eyes. The elder sister of Gina, Vera Trēs had always been called a goddess of fortune, contributing to the house by mobilizing ships and cargo. So she learned of business matters

as she worked alongside her father Fidel.

It wasn't as if Gina herself didn't have knowledge, but in the practical sense, it wasn't an understatement to say her experience was largely lacking.

But even in the Trēs House, there were some who questioned the support towards Lyle.

Vera spoke uninterestedly.

"We can monopolize commercial use of the port. What's more, two of them. Thinking of the scale, even you should be able to understand that it's a massive profit to the Trēs House, right?"

Vera's tone made Gina feel like opposing. It was true the Trēs House would likely grow larger, but Vera was too often away from Beim, neglecting the thing called the city's balance.

The crumbling of factions and power relations was something Gina was extremely wary of.

"… I know it will be a large profit. But by that, just what will the merchants of Beim think of us?"

Vera spoke.

"That field is father's job. So that we aren't the only ones making good memories of it, he'll at least negotiate the matter out. While I'm at it, selling them favors is also a profit."

Favor was a profit. Able to declare such a thing, it was that cold part of Vera that had kept Gina quiet up to now. But this time was different.

"Then is Lyle as well? Are you really just calculating profit and loss with that man?"

As Gina called Lyle's name without honorifics, Vera's gaze turned grim.

"… Don't forget his title. I'm just aiding him to the extent that I can. Just because father is soft on his daughters, you should be aware

he isn't the sort of person who'd sponsor someone just because of that."

"And that's why I want you and father to stop already. Your eyes have been taken by desire. But Beim isn't so forgiving."

Her sister Vera was fixated on Lyle, while her father Fidel on the monopolization of ports.

So they couldn't get a clear picture of what Beim was to do to Lyle. Such was Gina's judgement on the matter.

And in a certain sense, she was correct.

"Let me do as I please."

As she thought persuading Vera would be difficult, Gina gave her frank impressions.

"Vera, that man isn't so naïve either. Once you lose your utility value, he'll calmly toss you aside. You know what he did in Zayin and Fort Redant, Galleria and Rusworth, right? That man in dangerous. And you're just a wallet to him."

Ignoring Gina's warning, Vera stood.

"… I understand that. But I won't cause you any trouble. I never chastised you over Roland, did I? And now… no, that's enough."

As Vera left the room, Gina saw off her back. When her sister's figure was no longer in view, she brought a cup to her mouth, and narrowed her eyes.

"When my poor sister, driven out of the house, is abandoned by that man, I'll help her back up. We're sisters after all… being aboard a ship suits her well. I'll have her work hard for Roland's sake. She'll do her best for the man she once liked, so it's not a bad fate."

Gina acted with her sister's abandonment as the premise, but she did have a reason to make her move. If the Trēs House was to grow any larger, then by those merits, the probability of Lyle and Vera's marriage would rise.

And as that happened, managing the enlarged Trēs House would be too much for Roland. From the ground up, he was an earnest, and hard worker, but that alone wasn't enough for him to govern a House of that scale.

In that case, the one taking over would be Lyle, who'd already demonstrated such prowess. And in essence, Vera.

To add even further to that, to maintain the house, Fidel might even pull her and Roland apart, and hasten a political marriage.

To Gina, she definitely didn't want it to happen. So she took action…

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South of Beim.

In that completely undeveloped backward region, I wiped the sweat off my brow.

Season-wise it was still hot, or rather, because it was south, I got the feeling it was hotter than Beim.

Novem and Clara, Eva and May were moving separately to complete a request from the Guild. There was monster subjugation, and village reconstruction, so I sent them along that way.

I, on the other hand, had come to subjugate the Labyrinth that had been discovered.

Its entrance was the gate of an old fortress, and the Labyrinth itself was as if the fort's passages continued to extend on from there.

Torches lined the wall, illuminating the paths with an eerie purple flame. It was better than having nothing at all, so I was thankful.

In man-made buildings like this, there were times Labyrinths would manifest as well. In most cases, they become Labyrinths with undead loitering around, fated to be subjugated in no time.

Most undead would disappear upon defeat, leaving only magic stones behind. They had no materials, and yet when it came to

fighting them, they were troublesome, and exceedingly a pain.

There were even rumors that the grudges of those destroyed on the battlefield were what birthed such Labyrinths.

We were dispatched to such a place, but given such circumstances, it was determined it wouldn't amount to much money, so we were to suppress the place by force.

While the entrance to the fort had turned Labyrinth, the surroundings were in tatters. Numerous trees spread out randomly, and the earth was in a horrid state.

I looked upon the Labyrinth with Miranda.

"What do you want to do? Challenging it with us alone would be possible, but we won't get much out of it. On top of that, the Guild didn't even send anyone to survey the area… hey, aren't they treating us worse and worse?"

The reason for Miranda's irritation was natural. With barely any support or information, we were told to go off Labyrinth subjugating.

More than the East Branch, it was headquarters that had made such movements.

From the Jewel, the Fifth looked at the current situation.

『… In that case, is it about time? That was faster than I thought. Well, it beats being captured by them, I guess.』

The ancestors who had anticipated it weren't panicked at all. The Third spoke without a care in the world.

『More importantly, you know, if they left this place to us, then do you want to buy some time as you probe into their movements? They'll likely make their move once Lyle's returned to Beim, after all.』

Using these circumstances, he wanted to look into Beim's movements. As always, they were reliable, but folks I didn't want to make an enemy of. I held some pity for Beim.

I addressed Miranda.

“… A request’s a request. We’ve got to do our job properly. Taking all the time we need to be thorough. How about we set up a steady base before Novem and the others get here?”

Fed-up, Miranda looked at me, and pressed a hand to her forehead.

“Even if you say, take all the time we need, it’s just a pain, and there aren’t many floors, right? Treasure chests are a little on the higher side, but the monsters are nothing but undeads, so ending it at once would be…”

As Miranda was giving her opinion. Monica hurriedly ran up to me. She was panicked, of rather, it felt as if she was competing in something.

She slid in front of me, assumed a pose, and reported.

“Chicken dickhead! I, Monica, have discovered another Labyrinth nearby! Please praise me. Praise Monica! Now, now!!”

There, three fists flew into her. The impact sent her flying, as wires wound to bring the arms back to their owners.

Valkyrie Units One, Two and Three were holding up their weapons, stanced towards Monica.

“We’re the ones who found it!”
“You homewrecker!”
“Now take your baptism by fist!”

From the three expressionlessly posed automatons, I turned my gaze to Monica. I saw her stand, take out a large drill in hand, and set it into a high-speed rotation.

I ended up impressed her twin-tails didn’t get wrapped into it.

“You degraded piles of scrap metal… reporting to the chicken dickwad, being praised by him, and receiving his anger is all my role! I’ll scrap you on the spot!!”

They had begun to fight. I let out a tired sigh, while Miranda shrugged her shoulders. There, the Valkyries… one of the mass-produced models reported the situation to us. While the four

automatons were fighting, it seems they drafted up the papers.

“Master, here is the data about the Labyrinth. For you as well, Miranda-sama.”

Accepting the papers, Miranda gave her thanks.

“Thank you. You’re more considerate than Monica. That girl’s treatment of everyone besides Lyle is rough.”

Saying that, she turned through the pages.

I also put my eyes through my copy, confirming there was a Labyrinth nearby. Not far at all, it was cave-type relatively bountiful as far as Labyrinths go.

“… This one’s quite nice.”

Recon had only gone as far as the first and second floor, but there wasn’t anything to complain about when it came to passage width. It was a make you could call the standard of Labyrinths, and personally, I thought it right to report it to Beim… when the Seventh stopped me.

『Lyle, as I thought, you’re a man who’s got it. Good, now use this info to shut Beim up.』

I sent a glance to Miranda. She saw how I was gripping the Jewel, and quietly nodded, turning her eyes back to the documents.

She knew the circumstances, so I was able to converse with the Jewel in front of Miranda.

“You’ll shut them up? I’ve no idea what they’ll have to say about it.”

『Don’t mind it. Just make it look as if you’re taking time.Swiftly crush the fort Labyrinth, and take your time surveying the more promising one. And you see… don’t you think this area is truly wonderful? Right, it’s truly worthy of building a second Beim.』

I could somewhat understand what the Seventh was getting at, so I nodded in agreement. Climbing up a little higher, I could see the ocean.

Milleia-san spoke delightedly.

『Oh my, there's a point you could construct a harbor.』

The Third, assented.

『It's good enough to have a fort, so perhaps this used to be an important point back in the day. Hmm, thinking of what's to come isn't it fine? Making this place like Beim, if it were those merchants, I'm sure they'd regain their former glory within the century… well, we'll be regulating them, thought!』

Thinking they were considering something terrible again, my expression turned sour, and Miranda looked over at me.

"Do you always talk with them like that when we're around?"

She asked. I nodded, took my hand off the Jewel, and issued orders to the Valkyries.

"Return to Beim and deliver a letter to Damien. And continue surveying the cave. If we're to use our main force to crush the fort all at once… now then, how about we do some construction to make the area more livable."

I looked around, ignoring Monica and co.'s overly prolonged strife as I continued giving orders.

Throwing her large, two handed drill, Monica cried out.

"Double Drill Knuckle!"

"Naïve!"
"Something so obvious shant… what!?"
"Y-you had such a thing up your sleeve..!?"

It seems they were heating up or something or another, but I turned to them.

"Hey, you all have work too. Get over here already."

There, Monica, who had two large metal fists equipped to her hands, came to a sudden stop, and tucked her weapons away. She brushed off some dust, and raced over to me.

“Yes~, because rather than these scraps, my dear chicken dickwad is more important. And continuing on with that important announcement…”

“… Oh, I already heard that one, so it doesn’t matter.”

After refusing Monica’s report, I accompanied Miranda to our tent. Monica was frozen up with her delighted expression, while the Valkyries were poking her, and making ridiculing gestures.

Thinking it was inconvenient how they couldn’t make expressions, I decided to consult with Damien on the matter.

❼

… In Lyle’s mansion in Beim, Adele read a letter.

Maksim watched her state with worry.

“How fares it, milady?”

What Maksim worried over was the state of their homeland, the territory from which they hailed. Like this, Adele was periodically receiving information on it.

“I was nervous because we couldn’t get in contact for a while through that defensive war, but it seems alright. Perhaps her interest wanes as long as you don’t put up a resistance. It seems she’s currently fighting with other rebelling lords.”

Hearing that, Maksim dropped his shoulders.

“Can’t we do something to stop the resistance? They need only hold out for now. And at soonest, a few years later and…”

A few years, and Lyle would make his move. As Maksim was about to say that, Adele shook her head to the side.

“The greatest number of troops the four-country alliance can mobilize, omitting logistic support, is forty thousand, give or take. In a few years, even if their internal affairs are put on track, I can’t say for sure that it will even reach fifty. That isn’t enough. If it comes to

fighting Bahnseim, by the smallest estimate, a hundred thousand would be necessary. Even so, if Lyle-san continues winning with the minimum casualties, he'll have to get together some of the lords within Bahnseim… but if we wait that long, the lords of Bahnseim will have exhausted themselves out."

Feeling the national power of the superpower that was Bahnsim made Maksim scratch his head. He hadn't felt it when he was inside that nation, but the difference in power was too harsh.

Maintained at the center of the continent, the country of Bahnseim that had continued growing could probably amass a hundred thousand soldiers at its center district alone. If pushed, two or even three hundred.

Adding on the armies of its powerful feudal lords, they could easily prepare ten times Lyle's current force

"So the assistance of other nations is indispensable after all. But we cannot drag anymore nations into Bahnseim's internal problems."

That was Adele's seed of worry.

"I understand, but it is a time of crisis. We'll at least have to give its surrounding nations that land that was taken from them. Invade, and work up their lingering hatred…"

The two were frantically worrying over it, but where Lyle had his sights on was unification of the continent. Ignoring small countries, there were few who would get involved with Bahnseim.

Cartaffs was the greatest threat to the nation. To speak of others, there was Faunbeax, and a handful that would follow their lead.

Maksim sounded worried.

"Milady… Lyle plans to build an empire, but is it possible? We don't even have our own force to speak of. Automatons, was it? Proficient as they may be, we only have the ability to prepare a few hundred of them."

Adele held her head as well.

“… That’s… right. The forces in Lyle-san’s possession, even if they’re of high quality, they’re of much to low numbers. We have to do something about it.”

Both Adele and Maksim frantically thought over something to break the deadlock…

Cartaffs

… The dungeons of Cartaffs' castle.

Within its torture chamber, bound in an indecent pose, the Queen of Cartaffs Ludmila wore black restraining garments stuck fast to her body as she bit into a gag.

To her side stood two female attendants to look after her. The room was littered around with torture implements, but Ludmilla herself was uninjured.

Simply to stir up her fear, and tear up her pride, she had been sealed in the dungeons as she was.

Hearing footsteps in the room, she opened her eyelids, and glared at the door. Her long aubergine hair clung to her skin, the dark dungeons illuminated by the dim, wavering light of a candle.

The very individual who had bound her.

Larc Mallard, taking along her own companions… her subordinates, dropped by the dungeon.

Confirming Larc's face, Ludmilla bit down strongly on the gag.

His ashen hair was swept back, and unlike his usual wave-cut adventurer style, he wore a noble's dress and style.

His collar was loosened, and showing off his chest, Larc turned a vulgar smile as he looked at Ludmilla.

"Yo, Ludmilla-sama. How are you doing? Tied up like that, you're showing off your embarrassing side. It seems you were taking me lightly… now then, isn't it about time you gave me that favorable reply thing?"

Knowing his Skill displayed a high effect towards women alone, Larc's surroundings were fortified with females.

The attendants removed Ludmilla's gag, and after spitting out some saliva, Ludmilla glared at the man.

"You sure say some stuck-up things. Did you think I was unaware of how you made it seem I was immobile from illness? It seems you've gotten the castle's folks to take after you, and gotten some status, but that status is too brittle to do anything with it, right?"

Larc returned the glare. Perhaps he was to use his Skill to try and make her fall for him, as he forcibly turned her face towards his.

And by his Skill, in her eyes, the man of her ideals… or at least his figure overlapped with Larc's, but she sealed it away with willpower, and averted her eyes.

Larc sounded irritated.

"After having made light of me, and gotten bound in such a state, don't act so high and mighty!"

It was just as he said. Ludmilla had no words to return on that matter. On top of that, she had come to hate the movements of Cartaffs that even now had yet to rescue her.

(Good grief, the lengths they go to preserve order. How troublesome.)

Ludmilla had her surroundings charmed, and having attained some status, Larc had come to charm her this time, in a scheme to become king of Cartaffs. She had already seen through the plan.

And at the same time, she understood that for that sake, the man was unable to harm Ludmilla herself. She understood she couldn't be killed, and she made use of that fact.

"Yet the man too scared to lay a hand on that single bound woman sure sounds high and mighty himself. What's wrong, you've no shaming greater than this? You… you're quite the small man."

When Ludmilla said that, a vein popped up on Larc's forehead. He

took a nearby whip in hand, going right into whacking her with it.

She was assailed by a sharp pain, but Ludmilla didn't let out her voice. And grinning and laughing as she looked at Larc, she riled him up. Seeing her like that, Larc stood out of breath, and gave an order to the attendants.

"Use the best medicine to treat her!"

With those words, Larc took his subordinates, and left the room. The female attendants lowered their heads to see them off, and closing the door behind them, one of them stood as guard.

Another approached Ludmilla, took off her restraints, and began treating her injury. She spoke to her in worry.

"Your majesty, should we not put a stop to this yet…"

To the worried attendant, Ludmilla smiled.

"Oh, isn't it fine? And I can only laugh at those useless subordinates who let Larc converse with the castle's maids because it was a set custom. When they've come to be this bad, they won't understand a thing unless they go through a spot of pain."

Taking a stretch, Ludmilla lowered herself into the chair she'd been bound, and folded her legs.

It's true she told them to interact with Larc, but she had never even imagined they could only move according to set practice.

So Ludmilla let herself be captured on purpose. The two attendants were her trusted maids, and she had them act as if they were charmed.

But it seems those attendants couldn't take it anymore.

"But at this rate, the country shall begin to slant his way."

On that statement, Ludmilla spoke.

"Even without the matter of Larc, this country would eventually perish from its nature taken too far. There are plenty who prioritize law to run away from responsibility, after all. Up to now, they could be

called our strength, but taken too far, it is a fatal flaw."

Cartaffs' national colors involved a heavy inclination towards stressing the rule. At times, that had birthed about a splendid result, but come this far it had gone in a bad direction. Preserving that incline, those that took action held no responsibility.

They were rules, so there was no helping it. That matter was becoming conspicuous. Even if you added more laws, just how many people out there would there be to actually understand them?

She was called the queen, but Ludmilla had simply taken over from the previous king by those rules, and was practically a proxy.

Cartaffs was a male line, and eventually her groom would be the king of the country. So Larc had aimed for that seat on the throne.

"Good grief. Not me, they should've just chosen a male from the royal branch families. Father was making moves with that intent, but talks went forward before it could be decided."

Maybe because of the national character, the branch families didn't object to her enthronement as queen. Ludmilla's groom would in essence be the next king, so it wasn't considered a problem.

But to Ludmilla herself, it was quite a troublesome tale.

"Is there anyone suspicious of my absence?"

As she confirmed with the attendants, one nodded and reported.

"Almost all of them have noticed something fishy. But whether they'll move by it or not is the question."

On that answer, Ludmilla looked fed-up.

"Very well, then the one who saves my from this cell is the next king. Spread that rumor. If even that doesn't get them to move, then I'll make do with Larc or whatever. How pitiful."

While the maid was bewildered by her decision, Ludmilla looked up at the ceiling.

"Hmm, not bad. I'm no longer a princess, but… the prince or hero

who saves me, eh? Marrying someone like that is the desire of any woman of the royal line. While we're at it, how about we invite participants from outside the country as well? I've got to make our own men feel a little panicked, or we won't be getting anywhere."

As Ludmilla declared and enjoyed herself, the two attendants abided as if they had given up…

❼

Over the Katana in my right hand, I poured a liquid known as Holy Water.

It was a transparent fluid, but it let off a faint light, and once poured on the Katana, it looked as if the blade was shining in the dark Labyrinth passageways.

Grasping the sword in both hands, I tossed the bottle of Holy Water aside, and Shannon- who was holding a basket- caught it.

Standing behind all of us as a baggage carrier, Shannon caught the bottles tossed by our companions one after the next, and put them away in the basket.

The innermost chamber of the Labyrinth that had manifested in the fort was a large hall on the fifth lower level. It was a vast room, but the ceiling wasn't very high, and it felt as if the many irregularly placed pillars were barely holding it up.

The Undead before our eyes was a skeletal knight wearing full-body armor. Size-wise, perhaps he was around three meters tall?

Sinister armor and shield, its sword was of an absurd, haphazardous make I had no words for. More than a blade, it looked like a mass of iron.

Miranda, Aria and Monica were the vanguard, with me, Valkyrie Units One, Two and Three behind them, and Shannon at the very back.

With a spear in hand, Aria took a large lurch forward, before

bursting towards the enemy before us.

As that skeletal knight wielding its giant sword in one hand took a horizontal swipe, it let out sparks as it rubbed against the floor.

While Aria jumped to avoid it, it looked as if the enemy's shield was to send her flying. However, Miranda threw her dagger, forcing it to use its shield to hit it aside, and from there, its movements grew strange.

Miranda was extending thread from the fingertips of her left hand, and using a pillar as a pulley, she yanked off the knight's shield.

"Aria!"

As Miranda cried out, Aria lowered her spear down on the now-open left arm of the skeletal knight. At lighting speed… putting several Skills into a single strike, Aria's attack was truly worthy of the description.

Aria wasn't skilled at magic, but as a result of polishing her Skills and martial arts… at this point, she was a pivotal vanguard of the party.

Its left arm cut off and flying through the air, the knight opened its mouth, and let out an ear-rending cry.

Shannon was holding her ears with both hands…

"Just where is that thing's voice even coming from! It's just bones and armor, isn't it!"

… As she looked at the monster, and cried BS. I was also of that opinion. And as it tried to swing its large sword towards Aria, Monica smashed into its side with her hammer.

From the other side of the hammer, fire was spouting out to increase its output, it seems.

"This is a truly a weapon of romance! A strike of the strongest maid Monica, who understands true fantasy… take it!"

With its sword, right shoulder, and right side in general taken out by the blow, the unarmed skeletal knight raised a low groan. A portion

of the crumbled white bone and armor gathered towards it, but…

I looked upon the scene.

“As I thought, the holy water is slowing down it’s regeneration. My apologies, but I’ll be ending you at once.”

As I raced forward, the Valkyries offered support with guns. While the knight was struggling with its regeneration not going as it wished, it tried headbutting me as I came before it.

And as it did so, helmet and all…

“… I’ll cut it off.”

… A single vertical flash. As the line raced through it, the skeletal knight reeled back, before crumbling into white flour.

Holy Water effective against Undeads had been applied to the blade, and it was a huge help on how effective it was. If that weren’t the case, we’d have to continue attacking until it collapsed, or blow its everything away with magic.

But this time was a fort’s passages, and many narrow rooms, so it was quite a trial how we couldn’t get the conditions together to use magic.

Even in a wide room, using Holy Water like this was effective.

Seeing the Boss leave a Magic Stone behind as it disappeared, Aria spoke.

“If you don’t care about materials, Undead sure are convenient. Makes collection nice and easy.”

It really was helpful how we didn’t have to put on gloves, and rip open a monster to collect valuables. It was a plainly dreadful task, so there were many adventurers who’d just leave it to support.

I wiped the Katana’s blade with a cloth.

“It really was rough when I was a beginner. I would always fail, and Zelphy-san would shout at me not to be wasteful.”

When I told such a story, Aria also recalled.

“Yeah, at the start I couldn’t bring myself to touch blood. Zelphy held her head when she saw that, but… now I think I can understand her sentiment a little.”

As Aria told a tale of our recent newbie days, Miranda approached. While we were talking, it seems she claimed the treasure of the innermost chamber.

“Reminiscing is fine and all, but could you confirm this over here? Lyle, it’s this time’s reward. I don’t think it’s bad.”

In her hands was Rare Metal… metal bathed in the power of Mana… silver at that. It was a considerable amount, and if you sold it, it would surely net one to two hundred gold coins.

But we had purchased Holy Water for this venture, so we had quite some expenses as well.

If time was turned back a bit, this would be plenty to maintain the party. But at this point, putting labor for so much time, earnings of this level weren’t enough, or so was my honest impression.

“It’s not bad, but with that, we’ll only have scarce earnings. As expected, continuing on like this will be rough. Even when Alette-san’s party are favorably being directed to profitable labyrinths.”

Comparing with others wouldn’t get anywhere, but I could clearly feel the Guild’s intent.

Monica confirmed the surrounding affairs, and reported to me.

“Chicken Dickhead, preparations to withdraw are complete. Monsters have already stopped spawning.”

Within the Labyrinth. I had stationed Valkyries, and had them collect Magic Stones. Those girls’ external battery, or rather energy source ran on Magic Stones, after all.

They melted them down and used them as fuel.

The Labyrinth’s atmosphere grew quiet. As I confirmed the

subjugation was complete, I decided to get out.

Unit One carried up the Magic Stone of the large skeletal boss monster. Miranda handed the silver we received to Unit Two.

Shannon verified the contents of her own luggage.

“There are quite a few bottles that still have some in them. Aren’t these quite expensive? What’s more, they have an expiration date. An expiration date that comes quite soon, no less… I can’t forgive that they’re worth more than my allowance.

Shannon had a lot of pointless expenditures. Rather, she poured a majority of it into elven songs and recitations.

If you took her out to play, she’d mainly just listen to songs, and for meals, she preferred places where you could hear music or tales.

Miranda smiled, and roughly pat(?) Shannon’s head.

“If you learn to use it a little more systematically, I’ll increase it. So start by not blowing it all the very same day I give it to you.”

Shannon was as hopeless as always, but after meeting Milleia-san, she had grown just a bit… or that was the feeling I got. Even if you just call it assistance, she did agree to participate in the boss battle.

I thought as I left the vast hall.

(Now then, I’ll have to return to Beim once first. The Labyrinth’s subjugation report… that can come after I observe the situation a bit.)

Beim Starts to Move

Beim.

I walked the usual path from the mansion, towards the Guild I'd become accustomed to commuting. It was still a sweltering season, and the women of Beim wore lighter, and more alluring clothing than usual.

Just heading for the Guild made me shed my sweat, and as I watched my colleagues of the trade off to work in their full sets of equipment, I mused over how rough it must be. Though it wasn't my business, today I was wearing casual clothing, with only a few spare sabres hanging from my waist.

Novem walking beside me was also lighter dressed than usual.

"It's still quite hot. The nights are getting even harder to sleep through, so you'd best be careful in managing your health, Lyle-sama"

I was fine. I made a pillar of ice through magic, and left it in the room, making things a little bit cooler.

"Don't worry about me. More importantly, are you alright, Novem?"

I returned to Beim yesterday noon, but Novem and co. had completed a request, and arrived the day before.

By my return, we got the Guild report together, and like this, we were heading for the Guild together.

"My party was full of skilled magicians. But it's still hot, and there are magic tools capable of cooling areas on sale, so purchasing some may not be a bad idea."

Convenient magic tools existed. By pouring in Mana, they would lower the temperature of a room.

Such magic tools, unlike the usual armor and armament ones, were relatively cheap. They were cheap, but that was in the sense of cheap for a magic tool.

“Our funds are… no, I do get it would be convenient if we had one.”

If you could manage some way or another with magic, there was no need to hold a magic tool. At present, we didn’t have what could be called financial leisure, and at this rate, it felt as if I’d be relying on Vera again.

The two of us talked through the way to the Guild, and once we reached, we learned of a certain rumor that had become famous.

❼

Eastern Guild Branch, a private room.

Entering the room Marianne-san was charged with, me and Novem were able to inquire about the rumor.

“If you can save the Queen of Cartaffs, you’ll be made king? What is that supposed to be?”

Having heard that, I was unable to understand why, but the Third spoke reluctantly.

『Shouldn’t it be a princess there? If it’s a Queen, it kinda chips away at my motivation.』

The Seventh seemed to be of the same opinion.

『That’s right. I can’t help but imagine a woman of considerable age. Are you sure that isn’t some sort of penalty?』

The Queen of Cartaffs, if I recall correctly, was supposed to be a proxy. Age-wise, she wasn’t particularly old, and until recently, she had been spreading her name as the Princess Knight.

Milleia-san sounded a little angry.

『It's rude to be mindful of a woman's age. Good goddess, this is why gentlemen are…』

The Seventh imitated Milleia-san's tone.

『And I don't know what to think of ignoring a man's passions. Good goddess, this is why aunts are…』

In the next instant, the usual burst of gunpowder rung out, and the Jewel went silent. I presume that the Seventh and Milleia-san had something going on in their years alive.

Thinking of the period, there was surely time they lived together at the mansion.

Marianne-san returned a bitter smile.

"It's a rumor. But a rumor of Cartaffs has made it all the way to Beim, and there are some earnestly looking into it, it seems. What has been confirmed is that the queen hasn't shown herself for a while due to poor health. Also, there's a rumor an adventurer of ill repute has gained some status at the castle. I believe his name was Larc Mallard-san."

Hearing that name, I narrowed my eyes. Marianne-san processed the paperwork, took a glance at me, and returned her eyes to the sheets.

"Is he an acquaintance?"

"Met him a bit in Cartaffs. We've never talked, but he possessed a relatively troublesome Skill. I think it's one that only had an effect on women, though."

Hearing that, it seems Marianne-san caught my implication. She finished going through the documents, and went to get reward for the requests Novem and the others had completed.

Marianne-san spoke.

"I'll put in a report just in case. But there's something I can't help but

wonder.”

“Wonder?”

I looked at her troubled face, and after she confirmed the monetary sum, she began to explain. Though she didn’t know the specifics.

“In these sorts of matters, the resident Guild is supposed to move at an early stage. Cartaffs is strict on the rules, so I was sure they would move. Also, I get the feeling our headquarters are busy. I don’t think it has a relation to the matter with Cartaffs, but they arranged for a boat nonetheless.”

Not by signing on for a ride with the merchants, they were chartering a special boat for adventurers, and sending them over.

If the Cartaffs rumor was for real, and the Guild headquarters was genuinely making moves, then this matter would surely end in no time.

The Fifth spoke.

『If the Guild is genuinely moving, there isn’t a problem. They’ve got enough folks with ability backing them, so the Larc problem should be deftly cleaned up. Now then, we’ll be doing our own job, Lyle.』

On those words, I gripped the Jewel, and Novem watched the action. Seeing me answer to the Jewel like that, it seems she was curious as to what we were talking about.

Or rather, she seemed extremely excited. Novem herself held some esteem for the Heads of history. But she never asked to meet them.

❼

… Cartaffs’ port.

There, the skilled adventurers of Beim had gathered.

They were those called some of the best of the best, not attached to the usual monster brigades. Nor were they sent to subjugate monsters or complete requests.

They dived deep into the Labyrinth of Beim, and were specialists that earned their keep there.

Among them, one posed a question to the adventurer who seemed to be the leader.

“They sure are working things up for a single brat, aren’t they?”

On top of the main battling members, they had spares as well. But they were all composed of men.

They were wary of Larc, but even for that, the tone of the men had several unnatural points. The leader man turned his neck back and forth.

“It’s been a while since I last travelled by boat. It’s true they’re being quite cautious. I don’t think it’s enough of a problem to dispatch us, but… it had gotten hard to move around in Beim, is how it is. Let’s have a breather.”

From the start, they had been a man-only party, without a hint of female presence. Even so, there were times they worked alongside women. Still, this matter had absolutely no call for that. And no necessity.

Because Larc was there, it was impossible… but that wasn’t all.

“There’s a possibility he has a strong charming Skill against the opposite sex, eh… has quite a few troublesome ones with him. Now then, let’s go and meet our client.”

Lifting his hips off a crate on the harbor, the adventurer leader stood, and following his order, the group began to move.

❼

… Beim’s eastern Guild branch.

Marina listened to Tanya… Tahnia’s request in a private room, and grinned.

It was a mission with a high difficulty level, and on top of that, the type where it would be troublesome if its contents were leaked to the outside.

But from Marina's point of view, it was a fascinating request, and she hadn't the slightest reason to decline.

She looked at Tahnia's expressionless face as she signed the request form.

"… Your Guild sure does some dastardly things. Who'd have thought they'd ask me to hunt the adventurers of their own branch."

Tahnia didn't say anything. No, she had no words to reply.

And after burning the request form, she paid Marina a large sum as an advance payment. Nothing but gold, and five hundred coins at that. Accepting it, Marina stuffed the money away into her own bag.

"Now then, I'm going to be off taking on that girly. She's been on my mind for a while now. Gives off the scent of a beast, you see… the boy also intrigues me, but the girly is more worthy to be my opponent."

Tahnia spoke to Marina in a fed-up tone.

"… Lyle-ku… as long as the Lyle Party receives an attack, the details don't matter. There should be requests issued to the other adventurers as well. Marina-san, if you don't hurry, your mark will be taken by another adventurer."

"Now that's troubling. But it doesn't make sense that you're depending on a dispersed force. Wouldn't be best if you surround them with many, and strike them down?"

It seems Tahnia wanted to prevent Marina from acting of her own accord. For that sake, she gave an explanation.

"We cannot take Lyle down within the city of Beim. From our side, we'll do whatever we can to lead him to Cartaffs. After that, you need only attack the party members that remain behind."

Haring that, Marina sounded a little unsatisfied.

“So the Guild had a part in those Cartaffs rumors? I really wanted to fight that boy, but what a sad day it is.”

Tahnia lowered her eyes. It was her job to issue these sorts of requests, but it was quite possible the individual herself didn’t enjoy it. Her expression didn’t change, but the wild instinct within Marina was whispering it to her.

Throwing her bag over her back, Marina spoke.

“… As long as they don’t touch my mark, I’ll move how the Guild wants me too. Well, for the time being, I’ll just be taking it easy in the city for a while.”

Saying that, Marina left the room, licking her lips as the image of her target May surfaced in her mind.

(I met her in the Labyrinth once before. But this time… ah, how exhilarating.)

Before a formidable foe, Marina’s was in high spirits…

❼

… Bahnseim, that had become a neighbor of Beim.

In the nearest city to Beim, Blois read the report that had come from the free city.

“Looks like they’re serious.”

Before his eyes was an emissary of Beim, a representative of the merchants.

“Of course we are. Also, we’ve prepared satisfactory presents. I’m sure they will be to Celes-sama’s liking.”

The treasures the merchants of Beim had put their efforts into collecting. Looking over a portion of the selection of rare articles pushed his way, Blois noticed it was a bribe for him.

He didn’t feel like accepting it, but at present, he needed as much

money as he could, so he decided to take it.

“If you’ll let me give a warning of my own, it’s best if you don’t let her get too interested in you. Because Celes-sama is a whimsy one.”

And cruel at that, or so he couldn’t add. He feared that the merchant before him would tell tall tales that he had said as such. But more than that, Blois understood.

(Unless you meet the girl, you’ll never understand that uncanniness, huh. I’m sure the merchants of Beim only see her as a bit of an atrocious lass.)

If it were them, they’d be able to use Celes and rake it in, they seriously seemed to believe.

“Yes. We’ve looked into that field without any negligence. So about our safe passage?”

Blois took out a form, and handed it to the merchant.

“We’ll guard you to the ends of the lands under my jurisdiction. From there on, as long as you show the feudal lords that form, they’ll let you through. If they hear of presents to Celes-sama, there may even be lords and nobles who’ll volunteer guards of their own. Well, I guarantee safe *travels* to say the least.”

As long as you use the maintained highways, he made sure to add on.

The merchant lowered his head, and left the room. Seeing his form, Blois began wondering what sort of face he would be making on his way back, or if he’d ever return at all…

❼

Rauno-san’s office.

I had stopped by with Novem, and upon hearing his information, I knit my brow.

“… The Guild wants me?”

Rauno-san was making a docile expression.

“That’s right. The guild thinks you’ve done too much. That isn’t all. The Guild headquarters have weighed you and little Celes on the scales. It’s true you’ve brought about some benefit to the city, but the queen to be of a large power… there isn’t even a need to compare. Beim chose the future Queen, and that’s all she wrote.”

So they chose Celes over me. Even hearing that, I didn’t think it a mistake. If you were comparing a single adventurer to the Queen of Bahnseim, that is.

But it was too sudden. And they should have been able to play oblivious.

“So they’re out to crush me alone? The Guild higher-ups sure have some free time on their hands. No, the Guild as a whole, perhaps?”

Perhaps unable to bear with this matter, Novem condemned Rauno-san.

“Just whose decision was it to cut Lyle-sama off? If they take Celes-sama so lightly, even Beim will…”

“… Novem.”

I stopped Novem, and urged Rauno-san to continue on.

“… The information dealers are selling information on you. I’d like you to understand I’m crossing a dangerous bridge selling this info to you. The Guild plans to give you a request to save the Queen of Cartaffs. But that is a fake request. The previous party that headed that way was gathering of incredibles that breached the seventieth floor of our Labyrinth. They’re lying in wait for you over there. While that’s going on, there are plans to attack your comrades remaining here as well, it seems.”

I looked at Rauno-san.

“… So the Trēs House’s name had no effect. Is that what this means?”

Rauno-san nodded.

“This isn’t your problem alone. The faction headed by the Trēs House; the other merchants want to do something to drive it out of the city. But they probably can’t use direct force against the Trēs’. So they’ll use their abilities to crush your party. It should also have the meaning of setting an example. Anyways, there are a number of reasons, and Beim has chosen to cut you off. Trēs house and all.”

So it seems I’ve been cut off from Beim. But thinking of my actions up to now, there was no helping being discarded. More than that…

The Third was definitely letting a dark smile float over his face.

『… That’s wrong. The one cut off wasn’t Lyle. It was the city called Beim. Isn’t it fine? Among the scenarios we drafted up, it’s the ending we longed for most. So let’s bite them off, whatever traps they prepare.』

The Fifth sounded serious.

『We’ve got to confirm the rumor in Cartaffs as well. If the Queen’s rescue really is possible, this will become a large favor. It’ll give us a means to suppress the lands north of Bahnseim.』

The Seventh as well.

『So the time has finally come for Lyle to quit adventuring! Oh frabjous day, calooh callay! Thank you… gentlemen of Beim. I swear, we shall never forget your sacrifice.』

Milleia-san brought it to a close.

『So… for the sake of our Lyle, won’t you let Beim sink to ruin?』

All their voices were in order. I’m sure this was blood.

『IT’S FINALLY GETTING FUN IN HERE!!』

When a smile came up on my face, Rauno-san made a dreadful expression. Novem looked just a little bit happy.

“It sure is getting fun around here, isn’t it Rauno-san?”

“Oh? I-is it really?”

Unlovable Adventurer

A few days after I received information from Rauno-san.

Tanya-san dropped by the mansion. I was the one to keep her company, but there were only Damien's automatons in the mansion, so I ended up having No. 2 prepare some tea.

Perhaps she had no interest in my own, personal tastes, as she put out a different tea than Monica. It was probably Damien's preference.

Tanya-san sat on the sofa with proper posture. She hadn't touched the tea. Her tone was even more indifferent than usual.

I used a Skill. The Sixth's… Search… displayed Tanya-san's reaction as yellow or red.

Perhaps she had some hesitation. In that case, it meant she did know the specifics. Tanya-san was a person of the Guild. As expected, she was to prioritize it.

"Lyle-kun, an urgent request has come up. Perhaps you've heard the rumors…"

"About Cartaffs?"

"… If you're aware, that makes matters fast. It's about that Cartaffs; in recent times, there have been some turbulent movements. A request of one concerned in the country has reached its way to Beim, and we have determined it to be a request requiring ample urgency. So the Guild has decided to request this matter to you. As a reward for success, we promise fifty thousand in gold coins. The contents of the request are to rescue the captured queen."

Just as an advance payment, several thousand gold coins were prepared.

They never intended to pay the completion fee, so they wanted to show a request with considerably favorable conditions.

From the Jewel, the Fifth let his voice.

『So a few thousand gold doesn't hurt them at all? Good going, Adventurers' Guild. It isn't a bad sum to cover preparations.』

I looked over the document.

"That's quite an extravagant preparatory sum. But our party is nothing but women, as I'm sure you're aware. By the contents of the request, that's totally out, isn't it?"

Larc's Skill was a powerful one against the opposite sex, or so it seems the report had been raised. And it seems it was a plan to separate me from my comrades.

The Seventh looked over it.

『As long as it separated you, they thought it'd work itself out. But this time around, the Guild should be using its trump cards… underestimate them, and it'll be dangerous.』

In regards to the Seventh's opinions, the Third laughed.

『And isn't that why it's fine? Larc, was it? Quite a pitiful kid over there. I doubt he's aware of how he's being used by us and the Guild, after all. Oh, right, Lyle… do it by the plan.』

Tanya-san had also considered the reasons I may pose for refusal.

"It has been determined that success is more than probable with you working alone. Also, nothing but women was a lie, wasn't it? Maksim, Damien… the two of them are also registered as adventurers."

So they planned to thoroughly crush us? Even Maksim's name was coming up. I looked over the documents again.

"… I also have a request for Labyrinth Subjugation. Can this come

after I've completed it?"

In a troubled manner, Tanya-san spoke.

"It's an urgent one, so if possible, in the near future. Also, if it proves impossible, the Guild will dispatch reinforcements."

Hearing that, I smiled. It was a case I had considered. And the adventurers dispatched would likely be in the mind to attack us.

"That's a huge help. How about reinforcements for me?"

"As expected, that much is… however, Beim has already sent adventurers over to that side of the seas. We can arrange for them to cooperate with you."

Hearing that, I tilted my head.

"Is that so? How strange. All the famous parties should be off on other requests. Was it a dispatch from somewhere besides the East Branch?"

Besides the dispatch-type East Branch, the only other adventurers to stray so far from Beim were the mercenaries of the south. As always, Tanya-san's expression looked like a constructed one.

"That is simply how hurried we are. We will send more reinforcements to the Labyrinth."

I nodded, and moved to sign the papers, but suddenly stopped my hand.

"Oh, right. There are a few misc. tasks I need to do as well, so could I leave them to an acquaintance of the East Branch? … I'd like to put in a request for them."

Hearing that, Tanya-san thought a little, but eventually nodded with a smile.

"Go right ahead. However, sending it to ones too proficient will be troubling for us. And I doubt they'll accept if you propose them a request for misc. tasks."

I signed the paper.

“Oh, it’s alright. I’ve got a hunch on who’s likely to accept.”

I looked down, as I thought.

(Tanya-san, you’re being soft. Did you think it wouldn’t matter if you discarded an adventurer who would take on odd jobs?)

❼

After Tanya-san left, I called Damien and Maksim-san- who had been in the mansion- to the room, to discuss.

It was about the Cartaffs request. And I also informed them of how horrid the present situation was.

Damien took off his glasses, and wiped off the lenses.

“Hmmm~, and so? You’ve something in mind, don’t you, Lyle?”

Maksim looked nervous. The opposite of Damien.

“This isn’t good. Not being able to receive financial support from Beim, no matter how you think of it, it will affect our objectives henceforth.”

It seems he thought I was going to keep receiving support from Beim… from the Trēs House. And it was on that plan that Adele-san was moving.

I gave an apology.

“Yeah, I should probably apologize beforehand. We’ll have to vacate this place too. Probably, or rather, in the near future, the Trēs House will make some moves, and we began building a foundation at the point we were going forward with Labyrinth Subjugation, so I’ll make that point our next base of operations.”

Damien sounded reluctant.

“Eh~ I had taken a liking to this place’s underground laboratory.”

“I’ll build a building to your liking over there. And wait, I do think

there'll be some full-blown moves."

I spoke my mind to the two of them on the plan.

Of the anticipated adventurer attack in Cartaffs, and of how, through saving the Queen, we'd sell a favor, and have them glare at Bahnseim from the north for us.

Having heard that, Maksim.

"… If all goes well, it truly is a good deal. But there's a high risk. And when we're exposing milady to such danger, I can't even be by her side."

As I thought, he didn't want to be taken off Adele-san's side. To Damien, it seemed to be a pain.

"Three automatons. It's true I can prepare golems, but just how does that stand war-potential-wise? Can we win? Adventurers that have polished their skill in the Labyrinth, to be blunt, they be monsters."

To Damien and Maksim-san, I held confidence as I declared.

"We'll win. If we lose here, then either way, we won't win against the monster that is Celes. And also. There are movements in Beim to drive the Trēs House out. So I want to migrate them right to the land we're developing. Damien, can you persuade old Letarta?"

Damien put his glasses on, taking a cup from his maid automaton No. 1, and sipping some tea.

"I think it's possible. For better or worse, he's a craftsman. As long as he has a place to be and work to do, isn't it feasible? IT seems he doesn't hate the boisterousness of Beim, but he did come from the countryside, and he did say he missed it. Also, he was enjoying modifying the Valkyries, and it felt like he didn't want to abandon the work."

So we could get old Letarta with us. In that case, perhaps I could call out to the craftsmen and merchants related to him, and give them an invite to the south.

Milleia-san spoke delightfully.

『Lyle, let's have Eva-chan spread some rumors. That the land to the south is blessed or something!』

This person really was having fun.

There, Damien looked at me.

"… You'll take in the merchants that've lost their value here? If it were you, Lyle, then if all went well, I'm sure you'd be able to kick it off with the merchants remaining in Beim."

I shook my head.

"I'm sorry, but even like this, I've a strong sense of duty. After they've saved me so, I won't betray them."

There, Maksim-san turned me some eyes of doubt.

"… That's a different definition of, 'duty' than the one I know."

… How rude. I'm going to save the merchants that aided me from the collapse of Beim. That's plenty dutiful, isn't it?

❼

Having dropped by the East Branch, I personally asked for Marianne-san's room on the third floor.

Normally, there wouldn't be a problem whoever the receptionist was, but this time alone, there was a need for me to get Marianne-san.

The Guild had a considerable amount of staff, and they couldn't help but require receptionists who wouldn't abandon their acquaintance adventurers.

No, I won't say it was essential, but even so, I asked for her with the intent to use her.

When she saw me waiting in the room, Marianne-san smiled, as she brought in some paperwork. And she inspected my face.

“How rare for me to be called out like this. I feel I’m going to misunderstood, so if possible, could I hear the reason…?”

While she was joking around, her face turned serious as she looked at my expression.

“It doesn’t look like this is a matter to take in jest.”

Saying that, she lay the documents on the desk, poured a drink, and took a seat. After putting the drink to my mouth, I made my plea.

“It’s been decided I’m going off to Cartaffs. As for a boat, I’ll be using one of the Trēs House’s. While I was at it, I hired a party for odd jobs.”

Marianne-san’s expression didn’t change.

“Is that so. I do think you have it rough, but if it’s you, then you’ll definitely be able to complete the request…”

There, I made a smile. Making an exceptionally splendid smile, I grew to hate myself. This is the only thing I’ve really been improving in.

“So I’d like information on the adventurers who headed to Cartaffs. The detailed data safekept by the Guild… it exists, right?”

Marianne-san’s drooping eyes narrowed, as if glaring at me.

“Leakage of information is strictly prohibited. So what do you expect me to answer to that?”

“Even when my info’s going all over the place? A receptionist of your level should know what sort of situation I’m in, right? It seems you did take on newbie training as well, but you’re relatively knowledgeable about work in the Guild.”

Marianne-san stood from her seat, and moved to leave the room.

“… I’ll call another receptionist. And there’s nothing I have to say to you.”

I kept my smile, and informed her of the adventurer party I’d made a request to.

“This time, I sought help from Erhart’s party. They accepted it quite willingly. It was a large request, after all. Now that aside, Marianne-san, you got angry for their sake, didn’t you? Not letting them take a request where they might die, you caused a problem at the desk… I’m quite fond of kind people.”

Marianne-san turned around, and glared at me something awful. And she hung her head a while, which gave me enough answers in itself.

She surely knew. About my state, and what Beim was to do.

“So you knew everything. Yet you’ll still choose to go to Cartaffs; how stubborn you must be. From my point of view, it would be a huge help if you turned and fled.”

I shrugged.

“There’s something important left in Beim. If it were to protect that, I thought an extent of my behavior would be permitted. Now then, there’s no huge profit in it for you, but won’t you listen to my request?”

Marianne-san returned, sat in her chair, and turned her eyes to me. Not with her usual atmosphere, she had a sort of threat to her.

She had gotten in various experience in her own way, and that had come to form this sort of air.

“… Information on adventurers, was it? As you’ve said, it truly is a talk with little merit to me. If I had to say, it’s nothing but demerits. But I shall prepare the information of the adventurers who went to Cartaffs for you. The info on the ones attacking your remaining comrades as well. In exchange.”

What Marianne-san sought in exchange…

“A guarantee for the lives of Erhart-kun’s party. No, return them to Beim unharmed. Once you enter Cartaffs, then everyone with you is supposed to be marked as a target. They won’t overlook it just because they’re there for odd jobs.”

I nodded, and confirmed how long it would take to get the info with

her. It seems she could get it relatively fast, and I was impressed. Her abilities as a receptionist were surely high.

And after we'd gotten in order the means to accept the information, I asked her.

"You sure favor Erhart's party quite a bit. Is it love?"

There, Marianne-san gave a laugh, as if to mock me. And she looked at me in sorrow.

"You're half right. But to those boys… perhaps as cute younger brothers. Oblivious to the world, but earnest and hard-working… watching those sorts of children is the greatest joy of being a receptionist. Putting in steady work to mature, and happily reporting it all to us… Rather than a certain unlovable boy who perfectly pulls everything off from the start, I'd like to support those sorts of cute kids."

There wasn't really a problem if Marianne-san reported this matter to the Guild. The mansion was already vacated, and preparations were underway.

But having heard that, I confirmed that rather than Erhart's party, I was definitely less interesting to the receptionists.

"On the contrary, you'll help me for something of that extent?"

Marianne-san looked down, and let out her voice, bit by bit.

"… He resembles the adventurer I used to like. When I was still a beginner, I was relatively popular, so I got stuck up. So I had an earnest adventurer who'd come out from the countryside push himself for me."

Hearing that, I got the just. And Marianne-san put the developments I'd expected to mouth.

"Because of that, he died. Even leaving his assets to me… he really was an idiot. From there on, I was the receptionist of the newbie desk. Though it turns out I really was better at training new recruits. Because it felt worth doing."

I heard her story through from start to end, before standing.

“… I’ll definitely return Erhart’s party to Beim. I swear it.”

There, Marianne-san glared at me.

“If you don’t bring them back, I’ll curse you for life. After going so far for you, if even one of them is injured… I’ll teach you just what it means to make an enemy of a receptionist of the Guild.”

Her threat really did frighten me, but so as not to let those thoughts come out, I laughed. And after leaving the room, I pat my chest.

❼

… The East Branch.

At the first floor desk, Rühe accepted some documents from Erhart.

And Erhart spoke to her.

“Sorry, it’s about the next job, but I’m going to have to pass.”

Hearing that, Rühe found it rare, as she confirmed it with him.

“What happened? You usually confirm your next requests, and plan them out while you’re here. Did someone’s health take a bad turn?”

Erhart denied it as he shook his head. He had calmed down even further as an adventurer, fulfilling requests, while protecting Marianne’s teachings.

“I’m going to help out in Cartaffs from the request of an acquaintance. Well, it’s just odd jobs, but the profits are nice, and it’ll be a long-term request, so other requests won’t be possible for a while.”

Hearing that, Rühe looked over Erhart.

“Even if it be from an acquaintance, being called out personally is a proof of your credibility. Looks like you guys are already splendid adventurers… right! I’ll be expecting a souvenir when you get back.

And I'd love to hear what sort of adventures you had."

There, Erhart let out a sigh.

"You were cuter when you were still asking for candy. Say the same thing to everyone, and you'll go through some pain down the line. Well, we see each other relatively often, so I'll at least buy a souvenir for you."

Rühe averted her eyes a little, and spoke in a quiet voice.

"… I don't say it to everyone."

Erhart stood from his seat.

"What was that?"

"It's nothing. I'm expecting something nice, Erhart-san."

Seeing Rühe's smile, Erhart made a bitter one. Perhaps thinking he had been fooled by Marianne, it seems he still had a trauma when it came to female receptionists…

A Journey of Nothing but Manly Men

… Inside the Jewel.

Miranda and Shannon were taking Milleia on.

Out of breath, Miranda was wounded all over, while Shannon was sitting on the spot. Together, they weren't able to lay a hand or foot on Milleia.

Watching over them like that, Milleia changed out the shell of the gun in her hands.

『Oh, you girls give sure up easily. Putting the two of you together, you haven't even died thirty times yet. It's something you can't experience regularly, so have some more fun with it.』

With Miranda's personality and appearance, alongside the power of Shannon's demon eyes, it was impossible to land an attack on Milleia Walt.

But harassing wasn't all she did.

Letting out a sigh, she tucked away her gun, and started talking.

『Now then, let's put in some break time. There's no time left until Lyle departs for Cartaffs, but I have to at least pass down the bare minimum.』

As Miranda wiped her sweat, the wounds disappeared, and the sweat retracted as well.

"Minimum? This is?"

Milleia nodded with a smile.

『Of course. I mean, if you carry the blood of the Walt House, you're far from the minimum bar. And you see, Shannon… if you get serious, you'll be able to do even more amazing things.』

Shannon grabbed onto Miranda to stand.

"A-amazing things?"

『Right. Of all else, if I could do it, there's no way you wouldn't be able to. Being able to see the flow of Mana means being able to interfere with it. Oh, that's right. Are you properly studying how to read and write?』

On Milleia's question, Shannon averted her eyes. That alone was enough for her to comprehend she had gone against her orders.

In a moment, she closed in on Miranda and Shannon, grabbing Shannon's head.

『Shannon-chan… I said it, did I not? To learn how to write, did I not? As long as its ink imbued with Mana, you can see the lines outside of this space, can't you?』

Lifted up with one hand, Shannon wriggled around.

"It hurts! It hurts, great grandmother! That's wrong! While I was learning letters, I tried doodling some pictures on the side, and that turned out to be more interesting is all!"

Seeing Shannon give an excuse that didn't improve her predicament, Miranda thought.

(… The flow of Mana… if she perfected its flow within her own body, is this what happens? In that alone, great grandmother rivals Celes. This alone, at least.)

Milleia was also strong. But from the point of view of Miranda, who'd stood against Celes, it was a fact it was still insufficient.

And not being able to defeat that Milleia, she wouldn't even reach Celes' feet.

“Hah… great grandmother, could you fight me once more?”

On Miranda’s words, Milleia smiled as she released the hand grabbing Shannon’s cranium.

Falling onto the floor, Shannon landed on her bottom, and began rubbing it.

『Very well. That sort of ambition… I don’t hate it.』

Milleia took a gun from her fluttery sleeves, and took a stance…

❼

At the harbor where the Trēs House’s ship was docked, Me, Maksim-san, and Damien’s… party of four, I guess.

While I shed sweat from the sheer humidity, I looked at Monica, as she stared vexingly at Damien’s three automatons.

“Why am I keeping house, as the mass produced lot accompanies you? I’m… I’m the one who understands the Chicken Dickwad the most!”

I let out a sigh.

“Then try understanding my sentiment. You don’t have to put on a play, just move by the plan. Is the mansion alright?”

Even though Monica had been biting down on her handkerchief, she suddenly made a serious face, corrected her posture, and courteously answered my query.

“Yes. The cleaning was perfect the moment we vacated. But when it came to sales, they drove quite a hard bargain. As we were hurriedly leaving to run away, there was no helping it.”

“That’s nice. We lived there for a while, so I’ve got some attachment. I don’t want to make a battlefield of it.”

Preparations were underway, and the mansion had been sold off. A majority of our luggage was already transported to our new

stronghold, and being set up there.

Sitting on a crate, Maksim-san put his spear over his shoulder, and breathed out a sigh.

“Hah… I wonder how milady’s doing.”

Seeing his state, Damien pushed up his glasses with his fingertips.

“You just met her this morning, and you’re already worried? Thinking of the journey to come, you won’t be seeing her for a while. How about trusting in her some? Rather, I’m suddenly doubting whether this man will be useful or not. Lyle, will we really be alright?”

I had never thought Maksim-san would be this depressed, but I counted on the fact he would get out of it some when we got into battle, and nodded.

“We’ll be fine, I think? Well, let’s just watch the waters, and…

As I was saying that, Vera approached. As usual, she was wearing red, but as I’d refused her accompanying this voyage, her skirt was on the longer side.

I got the feeling her hair was glossier than usual. I’m sure she put quite some time into setting it.

If the Fourth were here, he’d definitely be loud on telling me to praise her.

“Lyle!”

While Vera delightedly waved her hand my way, Monica looked down a bit.

“Keh, angel wings, huh? Properly decide if you’re making the twin tail commitment or not. What do you plan by taking all the gook parts? Black haired twin tails… damn, she’s precisely aiming to gouge a man’s heart.”

Or so she said, but I ignored her and headed for Vera. On my approach, she held out her arm, and drew me close.

It looked as if we were flirting on the pier, and that’s precisely what

we were doing, so surrounding eyes gathered.

As I noticed it, I picked out Vera's younger sister Gina watching us from behind. Roland was by her side.

But by my Skill… Search… while Vera and Roland were displayed blue, Gina's indicator was red.

"Vera, thank you for seeing me off. Even so, your hair is exceptionally glossy today. And your atmosphere is somewhat different from usual."

"H-hey! You normally wouldn't say something like that. And rather, haven't you gotten better with words as of late?"

Watching over her delight, I played it off with a laugh. There, Gina came and struck up a conversation with a smile.

"Vera, you should leave it at that. And Lyle-san?"

"Something the matter?"

The smiling Gina was displayed bright red. While she held blatant hostility, it was surely difficult to discern that from her expression.

"I heard it was a request from the guild, but make sure you properly return. Or else my sister will grieve."

… Seriously, if it weren't for the Skill, I doubt I'd be able to discern her intent. I guess all I have to say is, as expected a daughter of the Trēs House.

"I understand."

Roland also spoke in regards to me.

"Originally, the head planned to come see you off as well, but these days, he's been busy with the port rights in Galleria and Rusworth."

Hearing those words, the Third muttered a little sorrowfully in the Jewel.

『… Fidel-kun. I'm sure he's enjoying himself right around now.』

It’s because he can say something like that knowing all the details, that I was certain he was a considerable villain.

Embracing Vera as a greeting, I whispered into her ear.

“Vera, be wary of Gina.”

There, perhaps sensing my meaning, she showed me a smile and nodded. Since she didn’t show any signs of an urge to press further, I assume she sensed something as an elder sister.

From a little away, Monica addressed us.

“When he’s not even in a fever time, the Chicken Dickwad is handling a woman so… give me back my pure Chicken! Give him back!”

Thinking she was a loud one as usual, I noticed a group observing us.

It was Erhart’s party.

A party of five, their equipment was in order, and they carried all the tools that looked necessary. Seeing me embrace Vera, Erhart smiled.

“Hey, looks like I do hate you after all.”

He said.

❼

… Fidel heard the report from his men at the mansion.

He was pleased to a degree, because the port construction was going favorably. But while Galleria was doing well, Rusworth was a little behind.

Even so, it was within the scope of the plan.

“Fidel-sama, in Galleria, the future Grand Duke Leold-sama has taken command, pressing development along favorably. The port and the maintenance of surrounding roads is all going smoothly, so it

looked like the port will be in usable condition ahead of schedule.”

His other subordinate explained Rusworth’s situation with a little anxiety.

“Rusworth is lacking someone to take command at the site. They have a sense of rivalry with Galleria, so there’s a worry they’ll push themselves to complete it… so, um…”

Fidel turned his face to his nervous subordinate.

“Did something happen?”

There, the man began voicing objection to this matter.

“Fidel-sama, Even if you may be head of the house, the support to develop two ports, on top of preparing another state-of-the-art vessel, if something happens, the situation will incline. Galleria and Rusworth; in this case, you should abandon the interests of one of the two, and work with the other merchants to…”

Make it a joint project, and split the profits. On that statement, Fidel flew into a rage.

“Just how much do you think the Trēs House has invested in that whelp!? Did the others invest in him? Hell no they didn’t! For those that invested, I’ll let them use it at a fair rate, and I’ve prepared some collateral. But I’ve no need to offer salvation to those without any foresight! And also… recently, those folks have been earning too much off of war. If we don’t revise it a bit, Beim will be rejected around as the city of death. It’s because they don’t understand that, that they’re no good. If a four-country alliance is formed, war will go down. But they’re not even thinking how to profit in such a situation…”

His own house had sold weapons, and profited off of war, and yet Fidel let out a sigh.

But it seems he understood that it would be bad for Beim at the rate things were going. For that sake, he dealt with goods apart from weaponry.

“… Anyways. It isn’t the time to keep looking inwards. Called the number one city on the continent, our habit of turning our eyes to nothing but ourselves is something that calls for improvement. If we do not, then Beim will…”

After he said that much, the other subordinate opened his mouth.

“Fidel-sama, it’s almost the appointed time.”

“Hmm? I see. Come to think of it, Vera went to see that kid off. ‘Lend me your precious ship.’ Even after he had the gall to say something like that… but actually lending it, I guess Vera is Vera. It’s true that’s her personal property, but…”

Mumbling complaints as he stood, Fidel led his two subordinates, and left the room.

Among them, in the anxious man’s eyes towards Fidel seemed there seemed to dwell a hardening light of resolution…

7

Aboard the deck of the Vera Trēs.

We went out on deck to discuss the contents of this time’s request. On the surface, defeating Larc and saving the queen was our main objective.

I hired Erhart’s party as support, but if they didn’t have work to do, they’d suspect something. And protecting their lives was also a request I accepted.

Marianne-san properly paid the request reward in information already, so I had to fulfill it no matter what.

And despite this and that, I couldn’t bear to abandon them.

Erhart pointed at us.

“Isn’t it strange!? Normally, it’s be more… you know!”

Not fathoming what was going on, he turned his head to his four

comrades, and they nodded as well.

This all started when we were discussing, and talks came down to Larc's Skill. A Skill with an effect on women… hearing that, he joked, 'if I had something like that, you think I'd be a bit more popular with the ladies?'

But hearing that joke, our reactions wasn't something he could forgive.

In my case.

"No, don't need a Skill for that."

For Damien.

"I'm going to create the one and only woman for me, so to be honest, I've no interest."

Maksim-san, with a cool expression…

"Adele-sama is the alpha and the omega. I've no interest in anyone else!"

… He declared.

While everyone had been sitting in a circle, Erhart stood, and used all sorts of gestures and a wrung out voice to make his point.

"Do none of you have any lust!? What do you normally do!? Ah, Lyle can stay out of this. Not like he's a virgin, after all."

Hearing that statement, I couldn't stay silent, so I rose to my feet. There were sailors around as well, listening to our conversation. And if that matter was one Vera came to know of, it would become something terrible.

"Revise that! I'm a virgin, you hear! What's more, in my case, it's quite a delicate problem! I have to be a virgin no matter what! So revise it, dammittt!!"

When I grasped Erhart, perhaps my seriousness got across, as he revised it at once.

“Eh? Ah… m-my apologies.”

And Damien looked at me with a fed-up expression. He boldly declared. That expression of his hadn’t a single cloud across it.

“Good grief, I cannot understand it. You save your precious for the one and only existence for you. What’s wrong with being a virgin? Ah, I’m a virgin by the way. What of it?”

Maksim-san also nodded.

“Right, right. Precisely my point. More so, then you guys aren’t? If you had a lover, then that’s all and well, but…”

On Maksim-san’s doubtful eyes, Erhart averted his own.

“W-what’s wrong with that? It’s the money we earned ourselves. We properly prepared it to play around. And we aren’t in debt. So what’s so wrong with going to the brothel!?”

It does seem Erhart’s party had gone to the brothel to discard their virginities. By the goddesses… why didn’t I think of that.

I collapsed at the knees, and pressed both my hands into the ground.

“S-so such a method existed. If I did that, no one would bring up strange things like who got to my… when we get back, I’ll be right off to the brothel to get rid of it!”

When I went with that as a joke, Erhart’s party looked at me with dubious faces. They didn’t seem to be too impressed.

Or rather, hearing it would be a journey of just men, I thought it would be sordid, but it was surprisingly fun. No, this was more liberating than I had anticipated.

Damien spoke.

“Come to think of it, I’ve never observed a woman’s form. I see, the brothels, huh… you think a small-breasted woman there will model for me?”

There, the Automatons No. 1, 2, and 3 on standby near him vexingly

bit into their handkerchiefs.

“When you have us, the ultimate existences by your side…”
“It’s breasts. These damn breasts are… for me to come to envy washboards…”
“I think back to how I scoffed at Valkyrie Unit One’s brick wall of a body.”

Within all that, Maksim-san alone was unshaken.

“Hah, Lyle-dono, it isn’t a problem soft enough to be solved by something like that. And wait, they won’t forgive it if you’re alright with anyone. It’ll just create a large list of new problems henceforth. Please cease and desist… Because the entanglements of blind love leading to a knife in the back is the worst end there is.”

Of course, I was well aware of that. From the Jewel, I could hear the giggling voice of Milleia-san.

『Fufufu, I heard it all. Wait ’til Miranda gets a load of this! Lyle’s going to throw his first to some other woman.』

… Oh right. There was that person in the Jewel. Our fun journey of men, coming this far, I suddenly recalled I was under surveillance.

Lyle's Party Aboard

… While Lyle had departed for Cartaffs, Novem and the others had completely vacated the mansion, and headed off towards the base where they were carrying out Labyrinth Subjugation.

Starting with Novem, Monica and Eva, and finally Clara with some guests boarded Porter.

Miranda was off preparing at the base, and the Valkyries were also mobilized, carrying out development of the general area.

At the stage where Lyle set for Cartaffs, they already knew what would come of the movements of the merchants and adventurers.

Novem turned a smile to the one riding on Porter's loading tray, Rauno's partner, and a woman of small build due to her gnomian race, Innis.

"I'm sorry to drag you along like this, Innis-san."

Innis shook her head, holding up her travel bag as if to embrace it. The bag of standard size looked exceptionally large when put beside her.

"It's alright. Rauno-san told me to do so as well. And…"

"And?"

As Novem tilted her head, Innis said it was 'nothing', and played the matter off with a vague smile. Seeing her like that, Novem grew a little wary, wondering what ulterior motives she and Rauno may have in assisting Lyle.

But unable to understand why the man would send her to be practically a hostage at the stronghold of potentially dangerous

individuals, there wasn't a trace of information being leaked by some Skill either.

Wary as Novem was, the precision and accuracy of the information Rauno gathered did convince her he was seriously aiding them for now.

However, they didn't leave room for negligence.

"I'm sure there will be some inconveniences for you at our destination, but if anything happens, just give us a shout. If it's within a possible scope, we'll take care of it."

On Novem's words, Innis nodded.

Light streamed in from the window installed on Porter. The outside scenery she could see from it made Novem worry for Lyle.

(Is Lyle-sama getting by alright right around now?)

It weighed on her mind how he didn't have anyone to look after him nearby, but this time's opponent was the adventurer Larc, who boasted a Skill that displayed high abilities against women. If they was the possibility of being charmed, then regardless of the Guild's schemes, he should be taken out of the picture, or so Lyle said, so Novem abided by his judgement.

(But it's not like we couldn't have left just one person by his side.)

It wasn't a problem if that someone wasn't her. The optimal candidate was Monica, but Monica had a job in mobilizing the Valkyries.

That would make Miranda and Eva the runner-ups, yet they also had much work to do at the base, so they couldn't be left at Lyle's side.

The Valkyries would leave much to desire in looking after someone, while leaving Shannon, May, or Aria would be more a bother than assistance.

Clara also had work, so regardless of how much she wanted to leave someone, from Novem's eyes, Lyle's decision wasn't mistaken. It wasn't, but it was true she was worried.

(Even if Professor Damien has his automatons, their priority list has Lyle ranked relatively low. I don't think they'll do anything to trouble him, but…)

Eva looked at Novem's worried face.

"Are you worrying about Lyle? It's alright. Even like that, he's surprisingly reliable."

As Eva glanced over, Novem as well.

"That's right. Lyle-sama has been looking quite reliable these days, so I'm sure it'll be fine."

She said with a smile. Comparing back to when they had started the journey with just the two of them, the current Lyle had matured enough.

Or so Novem decided to believe…

❼

… Around the time Novem's party set off.

At Beim's Guild headquarters, in a small meeting room rarely used, a few officials of each branch sat around a table and conversed.

The head of the South Branch spoke.

"It seems he's made his move. He's already headed for Cartaffs on a Trēs House ship. A sweeper confirmed it, so there's no doubt about it. There are also some movements in the Labyrinth we overlooked, but I do believe the time to attack is now."

Sweepers were a cleaning service. With a special role of cleaning up the adventurers, they were either former adventurers, or specialists raised by the Guild.

The one standing behind the East Branch's top, Tanya… Tahnia was also a sweeper. And behind each executive, various other sweepers stood.

The South Branch's executive was all aboard the assault of Lyle's party. The North Branch was specialized to sea requests, and not particularly interested. As he had to lend out personnel, on the contrary, he was in ill humor.

"Was there really a need to go so far? From what I heard, it isn't fighting power, but action and charisma that puts him a cut above the rest. You even dragged us into the mess."

To the pouting North Branch head, the South Branch's head gave a slight thorny tone.

"… If this time's attack succeeds, then the ones who benefit from the right to use Galleria and Rusworth's ports are your people of the North Branch, are they not? How about you hear it from the merchants?"

The North Branch executive shut his mouth. There was a deal cut with Gina of the Trēs House, and as long as Roland was recognized as head, she would abdicate the rights to use both ports. Such talks tied directly to the North Branch, so they couldn't say it was someone else's problem.

They carried adventurers that specialized in maritime guard and sea monster extermination, having become passive to matters on the land.

The West Branch's head ended up sending around loads of men from his own ranks, so he was also displeased. He stuck his glare on the South Branch.

"We had to send out two whole first-rate adventurer parties. On top of a number of our mains. And yet, isn't there a little too less from the South and East? The South Branch is only sending a single mercenary brigade, is it not."

At the South Branch, the information that war would drastically decline had spread, and many mercenaries had already begun moving to change their home Guild.

For that sake, the number of brigades participating in this attack numbered only one. They also had to deal with requests of their

own, so taking up any more would influence the Guild's credibility.

"Speaking to scale, it's a mercenary brigade carrying a hundred capable of battle. It isn't a problem. Considering numbers, wouldn't that make us number one?"

The West Branch executive slammed his fist down on the table.

"Cease this codswallop. I'm not talking about your scraped up riff-raff! Our conditions to classify a first-class adventurer are to breach the sixtieth floor. Just how many parties capable of that do you think exist in the world? Even those in our main body are all precious parties. Their value is different than your parties who'd die out in a few days, and those who fall short of second rate. It's value I say! "

Don't group our valuable forces with your mercenaries, the West Branch declared in indignation. The East Branch head listened to that statement, and butted in from the side.

"Well, well, this time was a decision from headquarters. I truly apologize that an adventurer of the East Branch is troubling you all so. As you can see."

As the East Branch head lowered himself in apology, the others retracted their venom, and restarted their conference…

❼

… Tahnia returned to the East Branch's Guild, and posed a question to her superior.

The two were the only ones in the room brimming with the scent of the coffee her superior executive sipped.

"… I cannot understand it. What could the Guild headquarters be thinking? If they assassinate Lyle, who assisted in the formation of this four-nation alliance, it is sure to put Beim at a disadvantage."

On Tahnia's question, the superior answered as he sipped. He wasn't behaving any different from usual, and spoke as if to test her.

“I don’t have the authority to overturn that decision. From above the Guilds, and the merchants above that, it’s a verdict that’s come all the way down. Well, if the mediator of the alliance dies, perhaps the talks of unions will flow away. Even if they suspect Beim, there isn’t a country in the area that can live without it.”

That was simply how large the city of Beim was. Even if the alliance was completed, and they went to war, the city was confident that it wouldn’t lose.

It wasn’t just numbers, the quality of equipment was also no comparison. What’s more, for an alliance that had only just formed, how many years would be necessary for it to take power? Would there be any countries who wouldn’t withdraw from it in that time? The four-country alliance had various uneasy factors.

“Tahnia, it isn’t a bad thing to hold feelings, but in your profession, it becomes a problem. Though if it’s feelings as a receptionist, an extent should be fine.”

Recalling her own job, Tahnia focused herself. Her superior put Beim’s movements to mouth.

“Beim holds a large power in this area. If it had the mind, it could destroy a whole country, and in truth, it’s done so before. And maybe that’s why. The higher-ups seem to think they can do something about the alliance, and Bahnseim as well.”

Tahnia decided to listen to his opinion.

“What is your personal opinion on the matter?”

There, her superior laughed as he spoke.

“Don’t pick a fight with those sorts, keep a sense of distance, and persist on with some favorable relations. But from the time he came to Beim, there’s been astounding growth all around. Perhaps there’s a need for caution? It’s my mistake. I should’ve been more wary from the start. He’s got something decisively different from the other adventurers. Something… he’s definitely moving with some goal in mind. It may be the case that Beim’s current state is dancing on the palm of his hand.”

Hearing that, Tahnia tilted her head.

“Then shouldn’t it have gone better for him?”

Lyle could surely have played it better, thought the woman who’d dealt with him as a receptionist. At the same time, because of the mismatched parts of him she’d witnessed at times, she thought he had perhaps made a mistake from his youth.

If he had proceeded more steadily, it wouldn’t have come to this. As she thought that, her superior looked up at the ceiling.

“Hmm… I thought we had cut him off, but perhaps we were the ones being cut off.”

He said in a tone filled with implications…

❼

Aboard the ship headed for Cartaffs, under the light of the moon… granted, using lanterns as well, we were engrossed in conversation.

The experiences of the standard adventurers I didn’t usually come in contact with- Erhart’s party- and Maksim-san’s knight situation in Bahnseim, on top of Damien’s blazing passion for breasts… the bag of seeds for conversation never ran dry.

And it came around to my turn.

“Eva’s, you know, her style, and showing off her body, it’s all part of business, you see. So she seriously looks after her figure. I do think her form is amazing, but on the other hand, she’s completely calm if you accidentally spy her naked. I’m wearing undergarments, so it’s fine; gives off that sort of feeling. Clara isn’t mindful of that sort of embarrassment either, and she’s pretty defenseless, but even if you caution her, her reaction’s just something like, ‘… so…?’ Even if we’re living together, it rarely gets my heart racing. On the contrary, for the ones with high guards like Novem and Miranda, when you occasionally see them when they’ve come out of the bath, that defenseless gap is more effective, you hear.”

Hearing that, Erhart and party also nodded.

“Come to think of it, the adventurers we worked with before were the same. On the first day, I got excited when they loitered around with nothing on top, but after getting used to it, you just start wondering if they feel cold like that.”

I laughed.

“Then why not quit wearing nothing but that tank top up top?”

On those words, Erhart shook his head to the side. The man constantly wore a tank top, and when it came to winter, he simply draped a coat over it. Even so, his lower half had sturdy metal protectors, and even now, his waist and knees were wrapped in metal.

“No way. This is what calms me most!”

But as his surrounding comrades looked at him, they spoke thoughtfully.

“No, I’ll use this opportunity to say it, but… Erhart, I get that you do wear a coat in winter, but when it comes to battle, you strip it off, right?”

“And what of it?”

“It’s feels cold just to look at, and seeing you get hurt there, it makes us hurt as well. I’d really like you to stop that. Let’s harden your defenses on your upper half. It’s scary to watch.”

“Y-you guys! Listen here, this is the style where I look my coolest! When I get famous, everyone’s going to go around dressed like this someday!”

Listening to that, Maksim-san brought the conversation back to where it had derailed.

“No, it’s best you prepare some proper armor for that. Rather, you’re just like those topless female adventurers you were pitying.”

Erhart said he couldn’t agree to that opinion, and stood.

“Why’s that!? Look, I’m wearing a tank top, aren’t I!?”

Damien was being waited on by the automatons, having them pour into his tea cup as he spoke.

“That is a single sheet of cloth. It’s no different than nothing at all.”

As we exchanged such foolish talk, we enjoyed the passage of time.

From the Jewel, the Third let his voice.

『Well, that’s about right for boys of your age. Silly as it may be, it’s a time to have fun.』

After a little silence, the Fifth spoke.

『…… Right.』

He said. But he didn’t seem quite satisfied, or rather, it felt like he was hiding something. I was curious, but I couldn’t ask at present, so I left it be.

The Seventh spoke, as if reminiscing.

『Back in my day, it was difficult to have these sorts of conversations.』

Milleia-san sounded like she was having fun.

『Well, I guess I can pretend I didn’t hear anything this time. Seems Lyle’s having fun, after all. Even so… Lyle, it’s best you be a be a bit more careful. About Miranda and the others showing a gap in their armor, I mean.』

Her words seemed full of implication, but I was enjoying my talk with Erhart and everyone else.

Erhart spoke.

“Come to think of it, what about that cute Shannon kid?”

I thought back to Shannon, and shook my head.

“Nope, nuh-uh. Perish the thought. That girl has that frail image outside, but in the mansion, she’s extremely slovenly, and getting hit

around by Miranda. More importantly, how about you? According to the rumors, you're getting along nicely with the newbie desk's receptionist."

Erhart waved his left hand, plainly declaring that wasn't happening.

"That's just a business smile, that sort of thing. I've stopped dreaming about Guild receptionists. Right now, I want a staff member I'm on good terms with, but it seems I keep being circulated to her line. Even if I line up somewhere else, that counter over there is open you know, they say… strange, ain't it?"

"Strange it is."

I was sure he was still mindful of that matter with Marianne-san. I worried a bit over whether I should tell him how she felt, or to keep quiet on the matter.

Even so… why does everyone keep circulating Erhart to that receptionist called Rühe? I don't think he's an adventurer to get newbie treatment anymore?

Maksim-san also found it strange.

"That sort of thing happens? Did you do something to be hated by the other receptionists?"

Erhart crossed his arms and looked down.

"… When I first got here, it's true I did some stupid things, so that possibility exists. Dammit, I want to punch that me of the past!"

A depressed Erhart and company. Having become adventurers oblivious of many things, they had come to realize just how ignorant of the world they had been.

Damien raised his glasses with his fingertips.

"If they keep pushing you onto a single person, it's possible that girl is being harassed. Back in my student days, something like that happened, and a few years later, someone told me it was bullying or harassment or something."

Hearing that, I was surprised such a thing could be happening to that Rühe receptionist.

“… Looks like receptionists have it rough. Erhart, you have to treat her well when we get back.”

Looks like he thought so as well.

“Taken to heart. Her souvenir can be a bit on the expensive side. I see, so she has her troubles too.”

I regretted how I’d witnessed an unpleasant side of the Guild, as I changed the topic.

Milleia-san sounded fed-up.

『… Wow, not a single one of them gets it.』

The Fifth was perplexed.

『Eh? Gets what?』

After he said that, the Jewel went silent. Perhaps the Fifth couldn’t understand why.

『W-what’s all this? Why are all of you looking at me with those eyes!?』

A bewildered Fifth Generation Head. I was also perplexed by the response of the Jewel.

Bandelphia

After arriving in Cartaffs, we immediately got our baggage together, and got on the move.

The Guild requested we meet up with the adventurers sent to the site beforehand, the meeting point being a shop not used by the local Guild, and rarely used by adventurers.

Even if they were wary of the local adventurers, it was a method, I couldn't find in myself to praise.

Anyways, if they came from Beim, it wouldn't be strange if they had information on Cartaffs' queen.

Larc had a skill to manipulate women to his will. No, a charm Skill. Because of that, it would be best to simply consider women to be our enemy for now.

Cartaffs didn't look any different from when we last stopped by, but with the Skills… Map and Search… I could confirm a number of red responses around.

Systematically walking down the streets, we went over today's plan.

"Today, we'll go right ahead, and enter the designated shop. After receiving intel there, we'll think over how to deal with it thereon."

After telling 'everyone', I walked ahead, and took the lead.

Behind me, Erhart felt a sense of unease at the scarcity of our baggage, admiring the convenience of the Box Skill.

"You could use a Skill like that? It's plainly hella convenient. You put away everyone's luggage and all."

I spoke at a level audible to the surroundings.

“Ahaha, it’s got a heavy Mana expenditure, so I don’t use it often. Because of it, I can’t use magic as a main offensive when fighting in a party.”

I could sense a number of ears perking around. And it doesn’t seem Larc’s party was the only ones out information gathering.

Erhart looked at his comrades.

“Oy, wouldn’t it be best we get someone to pick up a Support Class Skill?”

When he said that, they shook their heads.

“If you could choose what you got, we wouldn’t be going through such troubles. But it’s true Support is nice. I’d be happy if I got a simple strengthening Skill though.”

There, Damien walked up as he shrugged his shoulders. Leading along three maids, his figure drew quite some attention.

“How about you think of it as a party some more? Not just wanting a Skill because you’re jealous, you know. It’s important to think over what you want, but it’s also important to know what role you carry in the party.”

While I thought it was exceedingly rare for Damien to give advice, the maids were grinning.

“Looks like master is having fun.”
“We’re getting so much more data on this trip.”
“This scene shall certainly be preserved in our databanks for all eternity.”

As always, I couldn’t say for sure what they were talking about. But there was no doubt Damien had enjoyed this boat trip as well.

Maksim-san also addressed Erhart’s party.

“It’s also been said Skills are influenced by the desire at the depths of your heart. While I’m like this, what I manifested was a Rearguard

magic one. There was a time I yearned for simple strengthening, but now I'm glad I got what I did."

Erhart crossed his arms, and thought.

"That in mind, I got mine way, way back, so I can't really say why."

Damien looked at Erhart, as he leaned his staff over his shoulder.

"You find them here and there. Humans strangely adaptable to Skills. Rather, humans overly compatible with their Skills, I'd say."

I also gave some advice pertaining to Skills.

"Well, just imagine how you want to be, keep training as you have, and you'll get it eventually. Once you have a Skill in your hands, you need only polish it."

Erhart's comrade looked at us enviously.

"All the guys with Skills say something like that. I'd like something more specific here."

Erhart spoke to him.

"Isn't that what we're saying!? I wanna be strong. Make that wish, keep training, and you'll get it."

Maksim-san touched his left hand to his forehead.

"… If that was enough to comprehend it, we wouldn't have our troubles."

I spoke.

"You could go to the Guild's library or something, and research what sort of Skills are out there before you imagine the one you want. It's… quite effective, I hear."

Having an image of it was important. Using a Skill meant obtaining a body capable of using it.

If you learned one, your body would have changed to use it. Getting rid of it, or changing it later was fundamentally impossible.

As we were talking, we arrived at the planned shop. In it, loads of red responses were gathered together, and a little away, a few more were present.

Stopping in front of the store, I took a deep breath.

“… Shall we go in?”

Saying that, I hardened my resolve.

❼

… The detached force stationed at the base near the Labyrinth.

There, having entered the surrounding woods, Miranda led Eva along.

Eva was knowledgeable when it came to forests, and when it came to setting traps, she could give nice advice.

But among the adventurers planned for this attack, naturally enough, they had confirmed elves among them.

“That should do it.”

After Miranda set the trap, Eva looked over it, and tilted her trap.

“A trap like that will be seen through in no time. Even a singer by profession like me would notice it, and if there’s an elf who’s lived by hunting through the forests, they’ll see through it at a glance.”

Eva didn’t hide that there were elves more knowledgeable on the woodlands than she. Her tribe was one who had abandoned the forest to travel civilization, after all. Compared to the elves who hailed from the woods themselves, she was aware of how clearly her abilities fell short.

Hearing that, Miranda.

“That’s fine. We’re just trying to say, we have traps over here. More importantly, the problem is how this area’s turned into a forest.”

It was a terrain the Valkyries couldn't fight well on. If they got in some experience, they would be able to deal with it to an extent, according to Damien.

But compared to adventurers who'd piled up their experience up to now, they were evidently lacking.

Eva looked around.

"There were lots of monsters here, so it was dreadful how preparations fell behind. Compared to Lyle right now, who do you think has it worse?"

There were less numbers with Lyle. But for her force with greater numbers, Miranda understood they would send their own in proportion.

"With greater numbers, it may be harsher over here."

From the information they had received, scope-wise, there was one mercenary brigade of five hundred. And one Labyrinth specialized adventurer party of a hundred. Other than that, a number of parties, some tens in size.

Among them, the one to be most cautious of was【Marina】. A strange one carrying out adventurer work solo, but that also meant she had enough power to do so.

A seldom-found monster of an adventurer, and for parties below her par, she had the strength to wipe them out by herself.

Having the East Branch Adventurer Marina become a person to keep watch for, Miranda let out a sigh.

"Good grief, Lyle sure gives some impossible orders."

Lyle's order. It was one of extremely high difficulty.

Eva looked at her.

"Did you say something?"

"Just talking to myself. On to the next one. There are still some traps we have to set by the end of the day."

Guided around by Eva, Miranda proceeded through the forest…

❼

… Gathered were seven hundred and ten. And including the soloist Marina, seven hundred and eleven.

A majority were logistic support specialists, and the ones to truly attack Lyle's remnants challenging the Labyrinth were two hundred at most.

As if they were starting a war, the mercenary brigade erected tents, and invited the other adventurers in.

The Labyrinth-specialized adventurers also gathered, truly giving off the feel of a small military force.

What's more, they were capable adventurers of Beim. Even if their air was flippant, they exuded a somewhat sharp atmosphere.

Within that gathering, Marina sat over a pile of crates. She was tall, and while her ruffled, black hair wasn't maintained, it retained an extent of gloss.

Her trained arms could be seen under her rolled-up sleeves. Her hand held an ale flask, and she brought that to her mouth as she listened to the horseplay going on around.

It wasn't that she loved being alone. Being in the midst of this sort of ruckus wasn't too bad either.

But…

"Good grief, too worked up today to know if I'll sleep tonight."

She had worked in Beim from a young age. The place she first registered at was the East Branch, and after that, transferring was a pain, so she simply continued working there.

Invited by parties a number of times, she had tried joining to test it out. But it hadn't been right for Marina.

She loved battle.

The Skill passed down, generation to generation had accustomed her bloodline to it, allowing them to transform into something peculiar.

Perhaps because of that, she was naturally belligerent, and there wasn't an adventurer who could handle or use her well.

If it was mere belligerence, that would work itself out, but she had a number of other problems. Her instincts one might call feral couldn't permit her to serve under any weaker than herself.

She brought the drink to her mouth again. Some dripped down from her lips, but wiping it with her left hand, she didn't seem to mind it much. Picking up her ale side dish- some meat- in her left hand, she took a bite.

A voice called out to her.

The head of the mercenary brigade, and an adventurer party leader.

"Yo, Marina! You're as lively as ever."

Marina had a long history in Beim, and she had even participated in war as an adventurer. Because of that, she had these sorts of mercenary and adventurer acquaintances.

If you were skilled enough, they'd talk to you as much as they wanted.

So even one communication-inept as Marina fared alright.

The mercenary brigade chief was in high spirits. In contrast, the Labyrinth-specialist adventurer leader was low. He looked dark, and he let out few words.

"It's been a while. Did you think over that matter?"

Marina looked up at the darkening sky.

"That matter, eh? No matter how you invite me, it's pointless. I'm suited to being alone. While we're at it, want to try taking me down to get me to obey?"

On Marina's provocative eyes, the leader shook his head. He mercenary chief returned a joke for her jest.

"Oh spare me. I only push down women if they're my type."

Marina scoffed.

"Hah! Pretty words from a man who assaults women on the battlefield."

The chief's grin turned to a vulgar one.

"That's how war is. It's a blast. If you do it once, you'll get addicted too."

Having the attack left to them, while they did have the strength, to set an example, the South Branch had chosen personnel that were sure to be thorough with it.

(That boy sure is hated. I thought he'd be the type to conduct himself better than that, but… well, I'll play.)

And the leader opened his mouth.

"Today, we'll look into our foe. You'll be launching an attack on the special target, so are you prepared?"

The Guild had grasped information that Lyle had gotten a quilin to obey. And as a possibility, could that unaccounted young girl change into one, or could she have changed from one? So it was summed up.

That was May.

That May was to clash with one of the prominent adventurer powerhouses, Marina.

"She's my prey. Don't steal her away. If you're to snatch… you're dead."

Marina had a serious glint in her eyes, but the two didn't falter. It was proof of all they had experienced.

But at the same time, Marina was anxious.

(These guys are sure it's a simple job. It would be nice if the rug isn't pulled from under their feet.)

The chief spoke.

"How scary. Well, I won't lay a hand on your prey. Though I'll take the others. Oy, you understand that too, right leader?"

The leader didn't turn to look at the chief.

"I mind it not. What we have business with is the new Labyrinth they found. If you keep operating in a managed Labyrinth, you can't help but get the urge to challenge an innermost chamber. I'll only guarantee that as long as we get the treasure in the innermost chamber, we have no interest in anything else."

Just by challenging a managed Labyrinth, you would never lay hand on the treasure only found in the innermost chamber. It was a single cause of complaint for the adventurers. Hearing there was an opportunity to alleviate that curiosity and stress, they jumped onto this talk.

The interests of both parties overlapped. And so they cooperated.

Marina looked up at the sky.

"Now then, if it's coming soon… three days, perhaps?"

On those words, the chief laughed.

"A pity. Two more days. The elves on recon saw through that they weren't used to the forest yet. They did set a purposely forced trap as well, but folks without a proper commander are frail."

The absence of the commander Lyle largely chipped down the war potential of the party, thought the Guild. They weren't wrong.

"It's going to get fun. There are plenty of beauties, so our young'uns will give it their all."

On the chief's smile, Marina averted her eyes.

"That so. I do hope the rug isn't swept from under your feet. My job is to take out that girly. I won't do anything more."

❼

… A bar of Cartaffs.

The adventurers who ventured from Beim to Cartaffs beforehand had made first contact with Lyle's party.

Explaining they had a strong lead to the Queen's location, they had given them false information.

And to do their jobs, it was an extremely convenient location to lead them to.

A young adventurer spoke to the leader of the party.

"Hey, leader, after we take out that guy, are we just going to go back? From what we've found, the Queen's in the castle dungeons. And it seems true that if you save her, she'll make you her groom."

They sat at the bar. The mid-aged leader laughed at the young adventurer.

"You're seeing too many dreams, kid. That's because she just really wants to be saved, or it's some sort of joke. And you see, a noble's life is a boring one. Even more so for royalty. You should study society a bit."

The young adventurer's mouth turned sour.

"The hell. What's wrong with dreaming a bit?"

The leader spoke.

"But saving her for the fame and reward sounds nice. Hey if we get her, and she asks who's the groom, I'll nominate you."

Hearing that, the young adventurer poured ale into the leader's empty cup.

From a little away, a brown-haired unshaven man's ears perked up. He sparingly drank his ale as he inclined an ear to the surrounding conversations.

After a while, he called the shop keep, and after hearing the bill, he left some coins on the table, and departed.

The leader felt something off about the man, using his eyes to send orders to his comrades.

Two stood and left the shop, but the shop keep didn't try to stop them. Because they had paid beforehand.

And after a while, the two adventurers returned. One headed over to the bartender.

The other approached the leader's seat, so the leader opened his mouth.

"How about it?"

"He entered a normal civilian's house. I heard the conversations outside, and he was a husband who ran off after getting into a fight. Just in case, we're confirming it with the bartender."

The adventurer who went off to the bartender returned.

"He's been seen here a number of times, it seems. Doesn't drink too much, but he's visited the store countless times from quite a long time ago."

Hearing that, the leader felt relieved.

"I see. Then so be it. Good work."

Saying that, the two adventurers moved over to seats a little bit away…

7

… Rauno patted his chest, and gave his thanks to his childhood friend.

"Sorry about that, Dingo."

"Hey, if you were coming home, then you should've said something

first. I've got my own business to take care of!"

Giving a bitter smile, Rauno sat in the chair of the private house, and let out a sigh.

"Good grief, never thought I'd have to do a job like this in my home town."

There, Dingo… a man using an effeminate tone poured some tea for Rauno. From the depths of the room, his wife came out. She had been the one who had conversed to trick the adventurers.

"It really was shocking when Bandelphia-san suddenly barged in and made such a strange request."

Seeing the laughing wife, Rauno gave a cynical grin.

"I threw away my family name. Just Rauno is fine."

The wife shrugged her shoulders.

"Good grief… even so, when I don't even drink, why were you able to put up with that conversation so fluently?"

When Dingo said that, his wife put a hand to her mouth.

"I've been a woman from the moment I was born a woman. It's only natural for me to be able to do something like that."

Seeing his childhood friend, the knight Dingo so subservant to his wife, Rauno laughed.

And he thought.

(Right, good grief. When I come back home after so long…)

What he remembered was his conversation with Innis. Rauno had accompanied Lyle's party on their journey to Cartaffs…

Those Who Wait

The day after I met the adventurers who had arrived at the site beforehand.

In the room next door of the inn we used, a two-man adventurer party pretending to be innocent bystanders had taken up lodging to watch us.

I was impressed by the rigor of my own surveillance.

“Would you usually go that far?”

Maksim-san looked at me, and touched a hand to his chin.

“It just means that’s how high the other side is evaluated. I heard they were a first class adventurer party that surpassed the sixtieth floor, so I doubt they’ll be negligent in preparations.”

Voices didn’t carry out of the room.

It looks like they didn’t know which inn we would use, and the adventurers had marched in after we rented the inn, so they weren’t able to fully prepare.

If you call it soft, it may be soft, but they made sure not to take their eyes off of us.

Damien sat in a chair, embraced his staff, and sat in a slouch. Perhaps he was tired, as he was yawning.

“But good on them to say the Queen wasn’t in the castle dungeons, but imprisoned in a cave a little bit out of town. It’s the worst, feels like they’ll try to bury us alive.”

The cave was in a forest, and it seems they were trying to entice us

into it. As they arrived first, the adventurers said that it took some time to search it out, so they would be resting for a while without making a move. Or so they did well to make it look that way to us.

As I thought, we were out of our field. Saying they would depend on an adventurer of the East Branch, they surrounded us, and started up a merry banquet, so they truly were cunning.

I took a memo in hand.

“Anyways, by the info from Rauno-san, the Queen is in the dungeons beneath the castle. There’s no doubt she’s imprisoned there, but it looks like the Guild and the women at the castle are all under the influence of Larc’s Skill. I get the feeling they’re also keeping watch around town, but I’ll bet they’re looking out for outsiders.”

As I said that, Maksim-san smiled.

“After rescuing the Queen, and completing our first objective, I’d like to run. Looking at numbers alone, they’re close to a hundred. The main force, and the reserves… their strength is considerable.”

That strength tempered in the Labyrinth. Having fought on and on and repeated Growths, the adventurers planned to attack us were troublesome existences.

There, the Fifth offered some advice.

『… Lyle, while they’re definitely trouble, the enemy are Labyrinth-specialized anti-monster pros. Not pros against humans.』

Hearing that, I rolled the Jewel with my fingertip to indicate my denial.

Within the Labyrinth, there were many conflicts between adventurers. Having experienced a number of those fields, I thought I couldn’t make light of these folk.

But the Third agreed with the Fifth’s opinion.

『To say it to the extremes, their experience is one-sided. You saw Marianne-chan’s documents, didn’t you? Labyrinth specialists that became first class a few years ago, but they’ve only been working in

the Labyrinth the whole way. I'll admit that it still makes them strong, though.』

The Seventh gave advice.

『Think carefully, Lyle. It's true that it's important to pile up experience from defeating all sorts of monsters. But think of the present state, where the continent isn't being ruled by adventurers. A small group being strong doesn't have any meaning. There are any number of means.』

I took out Marianne-san's documents, and looked through them again. This could become a trump card, and it was definitely necessary. Not just as information.

It was information on adventurers kept by the Guild. I couldn't mistake where to use it.

"Me, Damien and Maksim-san. Then three automatons, and one of Damien's golems makes four more. We have to guard Erhart's party of five. War potential-wise, it will be harsh."

Looking at my forces alone, I determined it was clear that we fell short. It was certain we would lose if we faced them up-front.

I carefully put the documents away in a bag.

"Then let's count on Rauno-san. Whatever the case, moving now won't help anything."

Maksim-san lowered his shoulders.

"Hah, just how long will it be until I can reunite with milady?"

He said, and slumped.

❼

… The stronghold prepared for Labyrinth Subjugation.

A that base, Novem and the others had completed their preparations. Building walls like a simple fortress, and setting traps

in the forest.

Novem comparted the data Lyle obtained with the information Rauno had collected. Nearby were Rauno's colleague Innis, and Clara with her staff illuminating the area.

Turning the pages, she discovered a number of disparities.

There were Valkyries posted as guards around, with their lights on as they patrolled the base in the forest.

While the atmosphere was heavy, Innis didn't seem disturbed.

"… I've caught sight of a number of differences in how they've listed their Skills. Perhaps there's a difference in how it seems looking from the outside, and from looking within. Or could a false report have purposely slipped in somewhere."

Innis, in regards to that.

"There's no mistake in information Rauno-san has collected. And the results the Skills bring about are the same."

Novem denied those thoughts.

"That's wrong. A small mistake can spell life or death. But as expected, there are a lot of Skillholders. Perhaps the Labyrinth-specialist adventurers will be difficult. If that's how it is…"

Before Novem could say the rest, Innis opened her mouth.

"… Is it alright if I asked something?"

Novem answered as she looked over the documents. She had looked over them a number of times before, but her hands were free, so she checked them again. The documents were carefully being kept by her, and as they were always close at hand, they were easy to check.

"Go ahead.

"Isn't the Guild fearsome? In Beim, to the adventurers, the Guild is a giant mass of authority. They normally offer kind support, but if you go against them, I've heard they'll use any means to crush you. In

truth, even famed adventurers cannot defy the Guild. I've heard the relation of adventurer and Guild is different elsewhere, but are you not making light of Beim?"

The one to answer Innis' question was Clara, who had been reading a book under her light. Perhaps she had finished, as she closed the book, and left it atop the crate she was sitting on.

"It's true there are differences in other cities and towns. The place I was had a Guild cold towards its adventurers. It was a city centered on its university."

Hearing that, Innis made a guess at her home town.

"That would be Arumsaas, right? I've heard their library is famous. It's true Arumsaas is also a large city, but Beim exceeds that. No, it's in a different league. I've been curious for a while, but do none of your party fear the Guild?"

Novem neatly got the documents together, and after carefully storing them in a bag, she turned her body to Innis. But her expression felt even colder than usual.

"We know the Guild is conspiring with the merchants, and we know how dreadful those merchants are as well. The Guild has money, and their support is perfect, so I'm sure they've sweepers as well. But…"

"But?"

Innis looked at Novem, and tilted her head.

"… It's not as if we intend to win against Beim. Because we can't. Lyle-sama understands that as well. What's important is what's to come afterwards."

Clara had extended her hand to her next book, and while Novem said there was no way to win, she seemed exceedingly calm…

… Cartaffs.

Inside Dingo's house, Rauno recalled Innis' prediction.

Her Skill… Information… was one to derive a prediction of the future from gathered information. If you used it in gambling, it didn't exhibit any useful effect.

It is certain that Rauno will lose more than he wins, it gave a result that didn't even give room for dreams.

But the higher the precision of gathered information, the more accurate the prediction of the future would be.

Putting his chin against the back of the chair, he sat in it backwards, as he remembered Innis' words.

『… This time, no matter what measures the Guild uses against Lyle-san's party, they will be crushed. Even if the attack fails, they will use the casualties that came from it as a reason to corner them. Lyle-san's party will receive an exile verdict from Beim. For Beim to draw the interest of their next negotiation partner, Celes of Bahnseim… however…』

Weighing Lyle and Celes on the scales, whatever hero he may be, it was only natural for Beim to choose Celes, the one with more to offer.

To add onto that, Lyle was the individual moving behind the formation of the four-country alliance. If he disappeared, the probability that plans would fall through was high.

Official talks hadn't even begun, and it's not like it was all profit for all sides. Naturally, if there were pros, there were cons as well.

With such relations, for better or worse, by a single human called Lyle, the four-way alliance had come to reality.

And if he was gone, mercenary work would increase with the skirmishes going on as they had before. To Beim, having a war nearby was an important thing. Keeping a moderate distance, so as not to be dragged in, as the premise, that is.

(It's Innis' prediction. I doubt it'll be off by much… even so, why does she always grow vague when it comes to Lyle's party?)

There was some decisive lack of information. Rauno felt it so.

Even Innis' Skill was troubled to decide.

『… However, Lyle-san has aimed for this matter, and brought it about. He has forecast the possibility of Bahnseim invading Beim, and there is even a possibility he believes it isn't a problem if Beim and Bahnseim link hands as a result. But there is no doubt the one to win in the end will be Beim.』

Despite his youth, Lyle who used dirty means through thick and thin. To Rauno, it was as if he were some sly old man.

(The possibility of him having memories from a past life… yeah, no.)

As he gave a bitter smile at that absurd thought, Dingo came over to him.

"Hey, did you hear? At the port, an excessively imposing group has… Rauno, are you laughing?"

With his laugh witnessed, Rauno cleared his throat, and decided to ask on that previous matter.

"No, it's nothing. More importantly, what happened at the port?"

"That large mercantile house's ship returned after a relatively short period of time. When they got back, some sturdy men came down with weapons and the like. Even when the soldiers checked with them, they just declared their equipment was merchandise, so they had to go to the higher-ups with paperwork, and get it approved. Good grief, they'll always be stubborn, won't they.?"

Rauno knew of that information, he himself having been the one to send the bribe to the one in charge, so he just gave a nod.

"Well, this country's always been inflexible. Its strange parts aren't changing anytime soon."

Dingo looked at Rauno with a little loneliness.

“Rauno, you had a Skill unworthy of a knight, so they always pushed the dirty jobs onto you, after all. Even when it would’ve come in handy with recon and intel gathering. So when you were driven away… you should’ve given more a protest.”

“It’s all in the past. And I’ve no intent to return to knighthood. I don’t have to do dirty work, and spotting a person’s weaknesses to wring money out of them is just right for my personality.”

Rauno was once a knight of Cartaffs. He had taken it with passion in his youth, but it had been determined the Skill he manifested was unnecessary for a knight, and he had all the grunt work pushed onto him.

Dingo let out a sigh.

“If that’s alright with you, then fine. Even so, it’s getting dangerous these days. Is it because they leaked that rumor of the Queen marrying whoever saved her? Or rather, just how did that rumor get out in the first place?”

Seeing Dingo sway back and forth, Rauno frantically contained his laughter at all he knew going on behind the scenes…

❼

Night, a few days later.

I stood before the soldiers of Galleria that had arrived.

“Did you enjoy your trip by sea? Even so, Leold-sama sure is generous. So the ones he sent were Galleria’s elites.”

Soldiers under Galleria’s Grand Duke house.

Five hundred members in all had boarded the Vera Trēs.

Maksim-san looked at that number with a dubious expression.

“Are they really fine with letting this many foreign troops onto their soil? If it were me, I’d definitely prevent it. And wait, I’m surprised they let it pass on pocket change.”

In regards to things that had been decided before, those of Cartaffs would faithfully carry through. Hearing that reputation, Maksim-san's face stiffened.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Well, the sailors did make a bit of a… clerical mistake. The truth of the matter is that they're treating it as twenty-odd youths wishing to raise their names asking for entry to the country."

Damien put his staff over his shoulder, and looked at the castle nearby.

"But I do think it impossible to drop by a castle this sturdy with five hundred men. You don't have any secret weapons, do you?"

I nodded at Damien's words, but it wasn't as if I didn't have any means.

"Well, we've got to take care of this first, or they won't get panicked for us. Rather, what small force would challenge a force several times their size lying in wait for them? If there was someone who'd do something like that, I'd like to see his face."

Maksim-san looked at me, and sighed.

"Lyle, the current situation is much worse than challenging the adventurer party. Challenging a castle with only five hundred, you just turned up the difficulty. Shall I prepare a mirror for you?"

I'd broken the ice considerably with Maksim-san as well.

But it's not like a castle was always prepared for war. And precisely because it was a sturdy castle, there were methods that would work out.

"Well, we've various means to use. And I had Rauno-san prepare a map of the castle, so we'll be alright. It's a straight line to the dungeons."

Erhart's party, who'd been roused from their sleep, came out and

looked around in surprise.

“… Oy.”

“Now then, I’ll be leaving three hundred troops to Maksim-san, and…”

“Oy!”

“Hey, I’m not sure what to think of questions while I’m in the middle explaining… but so be it. Yes, Erhart-kun.”

When I nominated him, Erhart pointed around.

“What’s with this situation!? And wait, what happened to rescuing the Queen!? Why did things turn towards attacking the castle!?”

I shook my head.

“No, it’s because the Queen is in the castle dungeons. And Erhart-kun… numbers are important in battle.”

Erhart ruffled his hair with both his hands.

“As if that explains anything!? I’m talking about how hard it is to gather those numbers!”

The Fifth, quietly in the Jewel.

『Well, for gathering numbers, us feudal lords are more skilled than adventurers. Though we just borrowed them this time.』

Knights and soldiers, while I tried to get him to understand we were commanding those elites, the Seventh was buoyant.

『Fufufu, this brings me back to when I reclaimed the fort Faunbeax took down. That day was also a quiet night like this. Infiltrated the solid fort of those worn out from their merrymaking, and filled them with holes. I’ve taken down quite a few forts in my day!』

As the Fifth was strong in defensive battles, the Seventh was strong in sieges.

Milleia-san spoke..

『Brod-kun, don't get so worked up just because it's your field of expertise. Well, if you get as far as the dungeons, I'm sure the rest will be fine. Even so, when they learn of the queen's rescue, how will those adventurers move? I can't wait to see. I'm sure around now, those kids keeping lookout of you are hurriedly trying to escape those ropes.』

As always, a terrible personality. The two adventurers on watch were attacked, and tied up. We did knock them unconscious, but it was possible they were already reporting to their leader by now.

Well, by the time they get here, I'm sure it'll be over. With greater numbers, it's quite a trial to prepare. They were quite the cautious types, so it's thinkable they be rendered immobile by moving to information gathering.

The Third laughed.

『There's no way anyone'd go to the place they prepared a trap. And wait, rather than scurrying home, I hope they show enough guts to attack Lyle on the way out. I really can't wait!』

The Fifth sighed, and acted as a proxy for my feelings.

『… You lot really do have some good personalities on you.』

Milleia-san laughed.

『Don't praise me so, father.』

The Third also caught his sarcasm.

『Even like this, I think of myself as a diligent and honest human being!』

I thought it my heart. 'Yeah, no'.

Marina Against May

… The group proceeding through the forest had a number of elves at the lead, as they headed for their destination point.

Mercenary brigade.

And from the adventurer parties, elves were selected to take the front in reconnaissance. The bow-wielding likely-male elves looked amongst themselves, and nodded at times, as they moved on.

They disarmed Miranda's traps on the way, so the main force behind them could move forward.

What they saw was a fort-like base built for clearing the Labyrinth. Arriving at it, one headed back to inform the rest of their forces of a safe route.

The armed elves on standby confirmed the lookout Valkyries atop the walls.

"It's as if they're actually alive."
"Their appearance, at least. Looking closely, they make some unnatural movements."
"Don't let it confuse you, young one."

While the elves looked young, it seems, there were ones of considerable age among them as well.

And taking the main force along, their comrade elf returned.

"It's going smooth. One slipped, and got a bone fracture, though."

Hearing that, the elves shrugged their shoulders. From their point of view, it was simply impossible to lose your footing in a forest like that. It must have been a human or dwarf, or a gnome, or some

other race.

One spoke.

“Well done. You’ll always find someone who falls out from the journey alone.”

When an elf belonging to the mercenary brigade said that, an adventurer party elf gave a, ‘is that how it is?’ as he tilted his head.

From behind came the mercenary brigade chief, and the adventurer party leader.

“How is it? Oh my, they sure are cautious.”

The cheerful chief looked up and admired the height of the walls.

“They even have lookouts. It’s a bit too showy for monster slaying, wouldn’t you say? It’s possible they figured out that we would be attacking.”

As the leader gave that cautious opinion, and the chief nodded. He nodded, and immediately prepared a countermeasure for this sort of thing.

“Our mages come in handy at a time like this. They like it flashy, you see.”

The leader nodded to that. A few mages walked up from behind, talked with the chief and took the elves and some guards along, as the positioned themselves to surround the fort.

After a while, an elf near the chief spoke.

“Chief, the signal came.”

“Good job. Now, let’s start with a bang!”

Right after, magic was fired from three points. Water akin to a flood came down on the fortress, to wash away its walls of earth. Cracks emerged in the walls, and after a portion crumbled, a number of rocks came flying at it.

On collision with the wall, both object and impact point crumbled, the

lookouts were blown away, and a perfect point for penetration was created.

And finally, masses of flame came down on the enemy camp like rain. It blazed up, lighting the darkness so well, there was no need for any torches.

Before the mages skilled in large-scale magic, the leader muttered.

“For us, the places we can use magic are limited. On the contrary, we prefer high-output ones that don’t stand out much, but… I see, so you could use it like that.”

He admired the move of the mercenary brigade. For mages that fought in enclosed spaces, while it was called a specialized job, they required techniques to protect themselves. And rather than large-scale, they favored high outputs in a confined space. Accuracy was also important.

Otherwise, they would be hitting their allies as well.

The chief spoke.

“Now then, let’s get right to the march. Whoah.”

As he said that, he held up his hand to motion everyone to stop. From within the flames, a single young girl leapt out. Violet lightning raced around her body, and the glint in her eyes was sharp. The inferno to her back, she stood, and looked at they in the forest.

The leader spoke.

“She was in the documents. That girl is May. Sending her out so soon, is that how cautious they were?”

The chief spoke.

“Marina, your prey is out. If it turns out her corpse is a quilin’s, I’m expecting a share.”

Appearing behind the chief, Marina wore a coat, hand guards, and knee guards. Her hands were wrapped, and she smacked her left palm with her right hand’s fist.

“Do what you will. I only have interest in that girly alive.”

Saying that, Marina leapt out of the forest with incredible momentum, and May also kicked the ground, her fists thrust out towards Marina.

As the two of them collided, Marina was ever-so-slightly pushed back. Seeing that, the chief gave orders.

“We can at least station two to watch Marina’s fight. If it looks like she’s going to lose, report to me. If she defeats the enemy, secure the body. Leader-san, wanna split it fifty-fifty?”

Of course, the leader was privy to the high possibility May was a quilin. After thinking a little, he decided to nod.

“I’ll hand over the horns. But I won’t compromise on the rest.”

“Okay, okay, we can decide on the specifics later. Listen up, boys! It’s time for a joyous war!”

Adventurers emerged from the forest one by one, entering from the collapsed parts of the wall…

❼

… May was being pushed back by Marina.

If they fought she would win, but a troublesome foe… that had been May’s internal evaluation of Marina. But it seems there was a need for her to revise that.

She kicked, but Maria crossed her arms to take it. It should have had enough output to send her flying through the air, but after looking into Marina’s eyes as she untangled her arms, May understood.

“It’s just as Novem said. Looks like you’re the opposite of me. Ma’am, while a human, you’re approaching the territory of the beasts.”

On May’s frank opinion, Marina swelled the muscle of her body, as her canines grew sharper. May noticed how her black hair was

standing on end, but what had changed most was her eyes.

Her pupils had vertically become long and narrow.

“A trivial matter, girly… take off a human’s mask, and you’ll find a beast regardless.”

Marina’s Skill… Beast… bestowed a muscle enhancement alongside an atmosphere like that of a wild animal’s.

It wasn’t just muscle strengthening, it even increased the flexibility of her body. And made her even more belligerent.

Kicking the ground, Marina got in all the way to May’s chest, making May unleash a kick. Marina also kicked, purposely letting the forces contest.

There, Marina who had been losing in power until just before had come all the way to being called equal.

“That was too blatant!”

May thrust her fist, while Marina caught it on her palm.

The fist let off a grating sound, as Marina used it to hurl May into the air. The direction she was thrown was towards the forest, in the opposite direction of the base.

Before she hit a tree, May corrected her posture, and moved as if to land on the bark with both feet.

The impact made it sway, but before May could raise her face, she instantly sensed that Marina was before her.

Marina launched a kick, and when it was avoided, she hit the tree, and snapped it whole.

That tree that wasn’t dead wood scattered splinters and leaves as it fell.

“… Amazing. What stage of your Skill are you on?”

May asked what stage she was on, and Marina answered quite honestly.

“Still the first one. You’re a quilin, aren’t you? I hope you’ll let me get to the last one.”

Seeing Marina’s grin and laugh, May thought.

(You get these sorts of irregulars from time to time. Truly troubling.)

Lightning raced around May’s surroundings, in an attempt to knock Marina off her feet with magic. But Marina continued her offense without paying it any mind.

The bolts burned her coat, and scorched her skin. And yet, Marina was smiling.

In regards to Marina’s roundhouse, followed by a backspin kick, May retreated back, and extended a horn from her right hand.

May didn’t have the intent to triumph in hand-to-hand combat, so she tried to cut down her foe at once.

“This will be going against Novem’s orders, but you’re dangerous, so I’ll end this.”

On those words, Marina raised a delighted laugh of a voice.

“How interesting, girly! If you’re going to end it… I welcome it!”

May swiped with the blade-like horn of a quilin, but Marina took it with her arm guards. It had power behind it. And the edge was guaranteed.

Her quilin horn was her weapon, yet Marina had blocked it. As May opened her eyes wide in surprise, Marina struck her, and sent her hurdling backwards.

Her back struck a tree, and she fell onto the ground.

“In the Labyrinth, I got my hands on some incredibly hard, but crazy-heavy metal. These happen to be my favorite. Because they’re sturdy, and they don’t break. But as expected of a quilin. You dented them.”

The guards that had never been damaged no matter how much use she put in, had been blessed with their first mark. With the repeated

Labyrinth subjugations over her life, Marina had prepared her own equipment.

She wasn't an adventurer with nothing but skill.

May stood, shook her head, and looked at Marina.

(Her burned skin is already healed? And looking closely, there aren't any holes in the clothing under her coat.)

There was no way normal clothing could withstand May's electric discharge.

May revised her mental register again. The gold hair behind her ears parted, and horns grew in. They extended backwards.

As her two golden horns emerged, Marina looked quite excited.

"Very nice. Let's both show off our trump cards. I can't wait to see how much you're hiding!"

Saying that, Marina spread her feet, and let off a groan as if enduring something. What May heard was something as if a beast was trying to intimidate her.

Marina's muscle swelled, and the visible portions… her arms received a coat of fur, becoming like those of an actual beast.

A lycanthrope. To sum it up in a word, that was her form. As her hair grew thicker, May spoke openheartedly.

"You've gotten hairy, ma'am."

"Grrrrrr… k-kill…"

Hearing May's joke, it didn't seem she had taken it well. At this point, it was already as if she had sacrificed her mental capacity to grow wilder.

Marina rushed along the ground. In an instant, May also released her magic, and focused on strengthening her own body. They locked hands, and when it came to a contest of power, the small-built May looked like she was clearly at a disadvantage. And in truth, she was losing in strength.

However.

“It’s true your power increased, but it isn’t good to get so excited you lose the ability to think. Your previous form was still more of a threat!”

Head-butting to make Marina falter, May sent a kick into her stomach. But as if she were kicking the trunk of a great tree, Marina didn’t move.

Her weight had also increased from before. What had seemed to be pure expansion had even gained density, it seems.

May was shocked. Looking at Marina’s state, she noticed the difference.

“In pure physical ability alone, you can rival mine. You’re wonderful enough to warrant shock, ma’am.”

It was a world where every human, more or less, would use Mana to enhance their bodies. In such a world, with just the power of pure muscle, fighting on equal terms with what was called a divine beast made for quite a threat.

Grasping May’s ankle, Marina slammed May right into the ground. The place she hit was gouged out, forming a crater.

And blood gushed out of the quilin’s mouth…

❼

… At the attacked base, the Valkyries were loaded onto a horse-drawn cart.

There were swords and spears stuck into their bodies, and once rendered immobile, the adventurers stripped off their equipment, looking at their fleshy torsos, and laughing.

“Oy, they were made quite elaborately!”
“Wouldn’t these sell to those with *those* sorts of hobbies?”
“Then don’t soil them. You break it, you buy it.”

The guffawing adventurers of the mercenary brigade violently loaded another Valkyrie onto the cart.

The mercenary brigade chief looked over his prided sword that had chipped while fighting them.

“Che, if you get through their flesh, it chips. Even when this baby could easily cut through bone. What troublesome ones.”

Kicking the Valkyrie lying in front of him, he flipped it over, so it faced upwards. It had a spear pierced into its body, and from it, a red liquid flowed.

Its limbs were made of metal, So it had been defeated by blows aimed to the torso. While she had been wearing armor, the slightest gap had been enough for them.

The adventurer party, on the other hand, had carefully taken off the armaments of the Valkyries they collected, and sorted the parts on their cart.

The leader looked over the chief and his men.

“Make sure you handle the material you strip off with care.”

There, the chief broke into laughter.

“Sorry for that! Our rear-support will cleanly do it later. Well, if there are this many, it doesn’t matter if one or two is broken. But they’re wearing quite the nice equipment.”

The Valkyries’ main body were one thing, but in regards to their equipment, thinking over how much he could make if he sold it off, the chief couldn’t stop his laughter.

He knew that Lyle’s party had paid a fortune to get them made, and he knew there were merchants around who wanted to buy them off.

“It’s a huge harvest this time. But they really are cautious, these folks.”

The attacked base was small in scale, and there was another base further down. All was well if he could earn there as well, said the

mercenary brigade chief.

“All he did was divide our places for income, but… I’ll be damned, it looks like that kid really was skilled in war. He divided his forces, and minimized his losses here.”

But the leader’s reaction was a little different.

“My thoughts exactly. But our weapon expenditure was harsh. There are some who have even used up their spares.”

The chief looked around, and spied his members taking the Valkyries’ weapons in hand, and testing their feel.

“Let’s have them send some more then. Sending these guys to the back, and having them bring more weapons along on their return will be a huge help to all of us. The problem is… Marina is still weighing on my mind. You think she’ll be alright?”

A report hadn’t come in, so he was anxious, but the resistance was weaker than he had anticipated. And by collecting the mountain of treasure known as the Valkyries, neither the leader nor the chief had noticed it.

That besides the Valkyries, there hadn’t been any of those called the mains of Lyle’s party.

The leader spoke.

“I’ll send some men to verify it. If it looks grim, then we’d best make haste.”

The chief agreed.

“Then send my men. You lot, quit playing around, and head off to the next hunting ground already!”

The men of the mercenary brigade, and the temporary hired adventurer party seemed to be in quite some festive spirits…

Warp

The middle of the night. The location was the forest near Cartaffs' castle gate.

Time-wise, we aimed for around three to four, and carried out the plan.

"I'll be off for a bit."

Wearing the Cartaffs' soldier equipment Rauno-san had prepared over my body, I offered those words to the knights, soldiers and party members, as I stood, and headed for the gate.

The misappropriated equipment was dented, with some parts of it ripped.

Maksim-san looked worried, but Damien waved his hand.

"Will you really be alright? I don't think much will come of you infiltrating alone…"

"Won't he be fine? I mean, he has that, right?"

'That' was the letter I held in my hands.

Rauno-san had forged a decree for me. Its form was in order, even from the eyes of the ancestors, and it was well made to an extent you could even call it unnatural.

I tried asking where he'd gotten such a thing, but he didn't answer. Probably meant he couldn't tell me.

But even that Rauno-san was wearing his equipment, as he mixed in with the hidden forces.

“I just have to have them let me in alone. And it’s not like there’s a need to wrench the gate open once I’m in. It seems in Larc’s case, he had a woman on the inside make the paperwork, and he had actual official documents, though.”

When he asked for an audience, he was denied, so he charmed a woman in the castle, and gradually expanded his influence to infiltrate under the guise of official paperwork.

Are you really okay with that, Cartaffs? Or so I thought, but it would take time for the papers to be officially recognized, and as long as they were approved, carrying them out was the Cartaffs way.

Sugarcoat it, and it was diligence, dip it in venom, and you could say it was a means to abandon responsibility and thought. A large reason Cartaffs was able to torment Bahnseim so, was also in that diligence. You could have people overdo it a bit, ‘because it was orders,’ and they would put it to practice.

These guys are strange in the head.

With the Skills… Dimension and Real Spec…. I got a three dimensional grasp of the surrounding terrain, and details exceeding what I could get form Spec flooded my head.

Where the soldiers were, and what direction they were looking…

Processing such information, I proceeded to the rampart that had become a blind spoke. And once I reached it, I used the Seventh’s Skill.

From the Jewel, came his reminiscing voice.

『Right, like that, I often infiltrated the forts. From within, you load up gunpowder, and blow open the gate. Even if they’re strong from attack on the outside, it’s quite often they’re not so fortified within. In the cases where even that won’t break them, just go in, and lay gunpowder wherever the light touches.』

Placing bombs all over the fort, it seems he destroyed their equipment and facilities all over. In the panic, he would leisurely make his exit from the castle or fort, and assault it in its chaos, it

seems.

But the easiest method was to defeat the gatekeeper, open the gate, and let your comrades in, according to him.

It was something I was surprisingly unaware of. It was the first I ever heard the Seventh was a bomber.

From his dealing with guns, he had quite a few routes to acquire gunpowder, apparently.

“Hmm…【Warp】.”

Looking at the rampart, as I used the Skill, a horrid feeling of fatigue hit me like a cart. Enduring it, the scenery before my eyes changed in an instant.

I instantly hid myself, and observed the movements of surrounding soldiers as I searched out the commanding officer.

“… There.”

I didn’t use any weapons. I raced over to the most likely commanding officer-ish person in a bit of a haste.

“Captain! I-it’s terrible!”

I feigned panic and a shortness of breath. And it was true the Skill had worn me out. If I used that warp consecutively, then two would be the limit for the current me. Even putting some rest inbetween, in battle, perhaps three to five? Anyways, it was exhausting.

That state was watched over by Milleia0san in the Jewel.

『Lyle, that acting was a little lacking. You have to at least look a little paler. Humans can do anything if they set their minds to it, you know.』

As I took that criticism, the somewhat suspicious captain spoke to me.

“You’re not from my platoon, are you? Just where did you come f…”

“It’s intruders! An intruder has infiltrated the castle.”

My beat-up form. And on the information there was an intruder, the commanding officer sought that information over my identity.

“What is the meaning of this!? To permit the entry of some bandit, this Cartaffs Castle is…”

Milleia-san giggled.

『Oh no~. It happens to the best of castles, you see. Even so, after Larc infiltrated in front of everyone, that reaction is strange.』

And the members outside moved. Raising torches, they started appealing their existences from the forest.

The area around the gate instantly grew noisy.

“Captain, there are at least a thousand armed men outside!”

Hearing that, the leader chose to follow through just as he had been trained.

“Calm down! Rouse those asleep at once! Everyone else to your stations And you over there!”

“Yes!”

Pointed at, I replied.

“Get back to your own platoon at once, and await order! Did you tell them about the intruders yet? Numbers? Clothing?”

I instantly spoke of the intruder I had prepared.

“His hair and clothing were masked, so details are uncertain. Bue the intruder’s upper wear was a tank top, and he had a large sword over his back! Driving him off took all my might, and I thought it best to inform others, so I have yet to give chase.”

It seems the officer imagined that description to be a bandit. Hearing he had a large sword to infiltrate, he muttered that it was impossible.

“You have made no mistake. If you were killed, we would never have noticed the intruder. I Return at once. To your station! Just as we’ve practiced!”

In regards to what they practiced, they did seem used to their movements, and they swiftly took to their stations. They did seem nervous, but their movements alone were quite decent.

The Fifth looked over such soldiers of Cartaffs.

『… They're an opponent that would give troubles in group warfare. Without any distractions, they move just as they're trained. They're inflexible, but I can see why the northern lords had so much trouble.』

I was able to see the surprisingly proficient side of Cartaffs, granted, they did overlook the infiltrator In me.

"Now then, I should get moving as well."

Racing through the chaotic castle halls, I aimed for the dungeons.

❼

… Damien and the rest had fastened torches to wooden poles.

In order to make their numbers seem great, they put the knights and soldiers up front, with nothing but torches in the back.

Thinking that it would at least make their opponent see them a little bigger than they were.

"Now then, time's the problem. It's a fortress city, so played poorly, they could instantly gather soldiers from around. Rather, since they're looking at the numbers to see if they have to go out or not, it will be troublesome if information keeps moving around."

If they knew there were only five hundred, they would leave the castle to subjugate them. But if they saw more than that, then from the number of soldiers stationed in the castle, they'll bide their time, Rauno explained.

Damien pushed his glasses up with his fingertips. His lenses caught the light as Maksim put his spear over his shoulder, and looked around.

"That's a lot of words, coming from such a riff-raff fortress."

Sticking wheels on a board that couldn't even be called a golem, Damien had prepared a hastily-made fortress to control.

Its gaps were reinforced, and its make was one that could withstand just a bit.

"It's Lyle's plan. If magic come's flying over, we can only endure. But you think it's going well?"

Lyle had gone in, and put out information of an intruder to confuse them even further. Because by that, he determined it would make Larc go to the Queen.

If they knew of an intruder, then the one Larc was to protect at present would be the Queen. He could get his hands on treasures afterwards, but for the status he wanted, the Queen was essential.

Rauno made a fed-up expression.

"With a face like that, the things he thinks up sure are dirty. Having the intruder spread info on the intruder, there's something wrong in his head. Taking him down when he's heading for the Queen… it's true that makes the probability for his escape low, but if the enemy's in large numbers, it will be a huge problem."

Erhart, listening to that talk nearby, shook his head.

"… He was the type to do something like that? I thought he was one to fight more stylishly, wasn't he?"

Erhart's other comrades nodded to that. But to them, Damien spoke.

"What are you talking about? It's Lyle, right? There's no way that Lyle would put up a square fight. Right around now, I'm sure he's scattering false information to create mayhem in the castle. He's the type of guy to smile as he does all that."

Maksim also nodded as he appraised Lyle.

"It's true, he's only Lyle-dono when he goes that far. Well, how about we just stay on standby over here? The real battle should come a little later."

Erhart cradled his head over what more was going to happen…

❼

With the decree in hand, I headed for the dungeon, and showed it to the soldiers stationed in the passage.

“There is an order to eliminate the intruder at once!”

But the female soldiers charmed by Larc didn’t take my opinion into consideration as they shook their heads.

“The only one who can order us is Larc-sama. We have no reason to listen to any other orders. Until Larc-sama’s orders come, we shall not…”

I pointed to a part of the decree. Rauno-san had confirmed Larc’s handwriting at the Guild. He had reproduced it here for our use.

“It’s an order from that very Larc-sama! Please hurry!”

“M-my apologies! Oy, let’s go!”

“Yes!”

“I’m sorry, but I have to inform those further in of these orders, so could you let me pass?”

“The keys are over there!”

The three female soldiers ran off. Seeing off their backs, I retrieved the keys from a small table with iron bars hastily furnished around it.

The Third spoke.

『Yeah~, how should I say this, um… love is blind? Well, it makes it easier for us. This is also Cartaffs’ character, perhaps.』

I opened the lock and proceeded down the corridor, confirming the surrounding deployment. Larc’s presence I’d sensed a while ago wasn’t around. He was able to hide his presence from the detection of my Skills once before. It had disappeared quite unnaturally, but

this time, that didn't seem to be the case.

"Has the info yet to reach him?"

While I felt Larc's movements were dull, I proceeded through the dungeon. On the way, I showed the same decree to the other female soldiers and knights stationed, and had them let me pass. While I was at it, I even ordered them to search for the intruder.

I didn't forget to give each one of them different information.

Proceeding onwards, I headed for a place I got a response from, and used the key to unlock the door. It was an audience with Cartaffs' Queen.

Millaia-san spoke before I opened the wooden door.

『Lyle, you're dealing with a captive. Even if she's in a horrid state, you have to treat her kindly. The northern power of Cartaffs is one where you have to work hard to be recognized. Even if she's covered in dirt, embrace her. Even if she smells like garbage, your smile shant die out. Now show your might.』

Just what do you think I'm supposed to be? I think I really have to confirm it with her properly one of these days.

The Seventh was a bit taken aback.

『Well I doubt she's been tortured enough that she can't preserve her shape. How about we pray she's in prettier condition?』

She was an important woman to Larc.

I doubt he did anything to harm her too badly, I prayed as I opened the door.

❼

… Erhart drew the large sword【Gramr】from his back to fight the enemy before his eyes.

The group that jumped at the simple fortress hadn't infiltrated from

the castle, but the town.

Around, his comrades surrounded a swordsman with a great sword. There were other robed adventurers who had penetrated in.

They were exuding a different atmosphere from those of Beim, and Erhart could understand they were local adventurers of the city.

The swordsman with a black sword, unlike Erhart's sword with splendor in name alone, held a genuine Magic Tool. Erhart's sword was considerably chipped.

"You all plan to get in my way, huh. I'll crush you here."

When the knights and soldiers rushed to cut down the swordsman, Maksim came into stop them. As he forcefully pushed them back, everyone stepped down.

Damien sent his golem at the swordsmen, only to have that golem cut to shreds like a scrap of paper.

Damien put his staff against his shoulder.

"I never thought we'd meet you here. Um~ who was it again? Marc? Clark? Something like that?"

Damien's maid No. 3 corrected him.

"Master, it is Larc."

No. 2 comforted him.

"You were almost there this time, master."

At that moment, Maksim was attacked by two female adventurers. He parried them with his spear, and shouted for the all the knights and soldiers to step down.

"The enemy is in small numbers. We shall take them on! Don't unskillfully stick your hands in!"

The equipment on him was littered here and there with Magic Tools. That alone was enough to tell him his opponent adventurer would be troublesome. He couldn't waste soldiers borrowed from Galleria, so

he decided to deal with them himself.

Erhart glared at the swordsman… Larc, and took a stance with his sword. Damien tried to confront him as well, but other adventurers held him back.

“Good grief, we’re supposed to be guarding you.”

Erhart let Damien’s mutterings slide, turning all nerves in his body towards the swordsman.

Larc looked at him, and laughed.

“What’s with your equipment? That sword is a lump of iron, is it not? Your armor’s unbalanced, and more than anything, that tank top? Are you trying to mock me?”

Larc was laughing, but Erhart didn’t undo his stance, and didn’t respond.

(This guy’s stronger than me.)

With their large swords for weapons, their fighting styles were similar. From body build, and such factors, Erhart wasn’t losing.

But the quality of equipment was too far apart. The clothes he wore were high-class articles. The sword in his hand, a Magic Tool.

At a glance you could tell he poured a fortune into his equipment.

“You people. Until I save… the guy with the spear, don’t croak on me.”

Damien said as he looked at the three female adventurers surrounding him.

The guy with the spear, Maksim, was also taking on two, and it didn’t look like he’d be able to move anytime soon.

Erhart’s comrades called to him.

“Erhart, it’ll be harsh at this rate.”

“I know! But if we run here, it’ll end with a blade in the back. If we

don’t fight someone stronger than ourselves, we’ll never move forward!”

Fighting above yourself was a large experience. There wasn’t a doubt that Erhart’s party was earnestly working at the adventurer trade, but after experiencing Growth to an extent, their growth had stagnated. Bide for time, or take the gamble…

Erhart chose the latter.

“You’ve all said you hate being made the fool, right? Then let’s get back… at that woman!”

That woman was Marianne. The Guild receptionist who deceived them. When he said that, Larc gave a large laugh.

“What’s this? Could it be you’re trying so hard to get a woman to look your way? You really are foolish. With woman, it works out one way or another.”

Feeling irritation at that tone, Erhart clenched his sword grip again. There, Larc stepped in, and swung his sword with one hand.

“Small fries shouldn’t try to act tough! Those in my way should just up and die! Everyone, go and defeat the other already! Our allies should come out in no time! Just look at their numbers. The castle should send a force any minute…”

After he said that much, Erhart used his sword to hit Larc’s aside. Where Erhart’s sword made contact, sparks flew, and its shape changed as it was shaved away.

And protected by his automatons, pushing back the three adventurers with a golem, Damien came before Larc.

“Unfortunately for you, there won’t be any soldiers coming from the castle. By your laws, the highest priority is to protect the royalty, right? What’s more, if both sides have the same number, or the difference is slight, they won’t come out.”

Using the shaft of his spear to utterly defeat the female adventurers, Maksim similarly came before Larc. His form of attacking women

without mercy looked different than that of him missing his milady, Adele.

“As long as they learn weapons, women can be warriors! Or so I thought, but what ambitionless foes. Is this the strength of one that’s been charmed? It’s the opposite of Lyle-dono. Lyle-dono’s lovers show so much motivation it scares me… As I thought, women ought to be like Adele-sama.”

Larc looked around.

No allies coming from the castle. If it were only five hundred, then if the castle sent troops out, it was a number they would triumph over at once. But no one was coming.

“What’s the meaning of this? And what are you all doing!? Stand and fight!”

While the female adventurers didn’t stand, Damien held up his staff, and sighed.

“I’m disappointed. Disappointed in you. We were sure it would be a hard battle, and even spent our hours knitting up plans, but you didn’t even give us the time to use them.”

Lyle’s party had considered the troublesome action Larc was capable of. The reason the queen was captive, was likely because she could fight against his charm Skill.

And so having him use other women as shields would be troublesome. The reason he caused so much chaos in the castle was a countermeasure for that.

Even Damien and Maksim would hesitate to attack, if an innocent maid stood before them. And thinking of the future, they wanted to keep casualties to a minimum.

Wanting to end it already, Erhart stepped up.

“Let me do it. This man… he uses his comrades like tools. I can’t forgive someone like that… because I was once the same.”

Maksim tried to stop him, but Damien put a top to that.

“I’m not particularly interested, but if you want personal satisfaction, then get it for all I care. However, if we think it won’t work out, then we’ll step in and defeat Larc.”

Surrounded, Larc was thinking to cut down knights and soldiers in his way to flee. However, with Maksim circling behind him, he had no choice but to fight Erhart before him.

Damien had the automatons prepare a crate, which he took a seat on.

“Good grief, this is what you call a kill-joy. I wanted to go into the castle too. I’m sure Lyle would’ve kept me entertained.”

Saying that, he casually gave a, ‘yeah, yeah, get fighting already’ to put Erhart and Larc to battle.

His hand was firmly grasped on his staff, ready to take Larc’s life at any time…

Trap

I wonder what this means.

Just now, I had opened the door, and ended up face to face with a surprising scene.

“Oh, a guest? Seeing as how you’re not Larc, a messenger… you don’t look the part. That guy doesn’t keep any men by his side. In that case, did you come here to rescue me?”

A woman sat boldly before me. And around her, two maids stood back.

Her aubergine hair covered one of her eyes, and a bit of it was stuck to her face. It seems she was sweating a bit, but the interior of the room didn’t have any particular smell or anything.

There were torture implements lined around the three women, and seeing one of them, the Third.

『Ah, we had one of those back home.』

Or so he said, while the Fifth kept his mouth shut.

『…』

The Seventh didn’t seem to know what to say as he looked at the woman. At【Ludmilla Cartaffs】.

『She really is pulling that off. I can see what I see… but what’s with this situation? Even I didn’t imagine something like this.』

The Seventh’s surprise wasn’t unjustified. Of all else, Ludmilla-san’s limbs were tied, and she wore black restraining garments that made the lines of her body oh-so evident. Over the clothes stuck fast to

her body, there were an excessive amount of belts stretching over her.

The problem wasn't just with the clothing.

"U-um… that appearance is…?"

When I pointed it out, Lydmilla-san gave a light laugh.

"Oh, my apologies. This isn't my fetish, mind you. That Larc guy dressed me quite obscenely. Oy, it's not necessary anymore, so could you be a dear and take these off?"

The two maids unfastened her from her restraints. Having been put in embarrassing clothing and pose, Ludmilla-san spoke to me without the slightest hint of shame.

Perhaps her body was sore, as she turned her head, and lightly stretched around. Every time she moved, her clothes let off a grating sound.

"Um, if you could take it off just like that, why did you stay bound?"

I went right up, and asked what was on my mind. The other party held no hostility. On the contrary, the Skills showed her in the amiable color of blue.

"Because it's that guy's fetish. He sometimes drops by as if he suddenly remembers I'm here. If he came at fixed intervals, then I'd only have to be in that pose at that time, but if it's so irregular, I've no idea when he's coming, you see."

Not embarrassed at all, she leaned herself against the obscene utensils, looked at me, and began her appraisal.

It was a little, no, I'll just say I don't think it's my fault for being slouched over.

When I averted my eyes from her grinning face, she gave a laugh.

"Don't be so angry. From what I can see, you're not a soldier of my country. Though I don't think it would be bad for a soldier of this land of rules to break those rules and save me alone. Now then, could I

have the honor of hearing your name?”

Without correcting my posture, I introduced myself to Ludmilla-san.

“Adventurer of Beim… Lyle Walt. A request for your rescue made it to Beim, so here I am.”

Hearing that, Ludmilla opened her eyes wide, and laughed. Had she heard my name before? It was as I thought that. Come to think of it, when I defeated Tressy, I became relatively famous in these parts.

“I see. So that was you. I heard there was an adventurer who defeated the Trident Serpent, and wanted to meet him. Though I never thought that adventurer would come to my aid. I see, so you’re not might alone. You had the insight to slip into the soldiers, and maneuver around them. Nice. You’re really nice.”

Those eyes I’d equate to a raptor eyeing its prey, were violet, and imbued with a dubious light. She was licking her lips, and when I had come to save her, I saw an illusion of myself being taken captive.

One of the maids spoke to the somewhat excited Ludmilla-san.

“Your majesty, you have already accomplished your objective. I do not believe there be any more reason for you to stay here.”

Nodding, Ludmilla walked right out of the room. But taking a sidelong glance at me, she smiled.

“You… Lyle, follow close. I’m curious about the state of the castle. Where is my weapon?”

She grabbed my arm and pulled me, leading me away from the torture chamber. One of the maids answered.

“It’s being kept nearby.”

Saying that, the maid went into a nearby room, and came out with some clothes, and a sword.

The sword was slender, but long. It looked quite difficult to use. Ludmilla-san drew it, and inspected its edge.

The blade was red, and I could understand from looking at it, that it

was a form of Magic Tool.

“… You even kept it maintained. Good work. Now then, even for me, these clothes are a bit much. I guess I’ll change.”

Saying that, still pulling me by the hand, Ludmilla and the maid entered a storehouse-like room.

I freed my arm, while the two maids removed the clothes Ludmilla was wearing. After preparing a bucket, they filled it with water, and heated it to bathwater.

From how they used magic, they were surely the girls of noble houses. And after wiping down Ludmilla-san’s now-naked body, they dressed her in the outfit they’d prepared.

I was averting my eyes, but the Seventh had seen it all, and…

『… That’s not any different than before!』

He yelled.

Taking a glance, it was a black garb snugly fit specifically made to show her body’s lines. While it did take the hips and an overcoat into consideration with its design, it was still practically the same as what she had been wearing before.

And Ludmilla-san stroked her hair.

“How boring. You know, I was intentionally showing you… do you hate women?”

When I shook my head, Ludmilla-san laughed. Compared to me, I got the feeling our ages couldn’t be further than four years apart. As I thought over whether it was alright for a girl of that age to expose her skin so boldly…

“Hmm, you’re surprisingly innocent? But that’s nice in itself. I like you! Become my groom!”

The two maids also nodded.

“Very well. With conduct and wisdom, there isn’t a problem with his strength either.”

“What’s left is the problem of where he’ll get if he trains, but if her majesty supports him, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

… They said something.

Milleia-san looked over Ludmilla-san’s state.

『Kuh, how could it be. When we came to save her, it seems we’ve wandered right into her trap… for her to use Larc to trap us…! There’s the complex web of power struggles and schemes, and that’s fine and all, but I hate how we wandered into a trap!』

It seems I fell for a trap. What sort of trap would that be?

The Third was also vexed.

『Göttinderdämmerung! It’s true it’s a nice development, but it’s frustrating how it feels like we were deceived! Lyle, aim for the turnabout!』

What turnabout? Since it’s the Third, it may just be one off his usual jokes.

❼

… Surrounded by enemies, in a situation where the castle wouldn’t send out soldiers or knights.

Facing Erhart, Larc was in a panic, and from that, he felt fear. There wasn’t a single woman around, and his comrades had been bound in an instant.

He never thought his hand would fall short at this point, and as long as he got into the castle, his foes would have a hard time laying hands on him.

“Y-you all… h-how about you wait a second? Okay?”

Opening his left hand, and holding it upfront, Larc smiled at Erhart, but his face was stiff, and perhaps from the fear, he had broken into a cold sweat.

“I’m sorry. No, I really just wanted to defeat a few to get some achievements and build up status. I didn’t have any intent to kill. So can you let me off? I-if you want, I’ll give you women. How about those women over there? They’re useful as adventurers, and their appearances are pretty, so…”

There wasn’t anyone lending an ear to his negotiations. At the time he attacked, there was not doubt he did it with an intent to kill.

Erhart held his large, chipped sword straight ahead, to show there wasn’t any change in his sentiment.

He truly meant to fight Larc.

Larc looked at the magician Damien, sitting atop a wooden crate.

“H-how about you!? Women, and money as well! I’m close with some rich girls! So I can prepare whatever amount you wish…”

On those words, Damien wasn’t lured in. He even scoffed.

“Say that again after you nab the daughter of the leading merchant on the continent. Can you put out several million in gold? I doubt it. You see… the more I hear from you, the more disappointed I feel. At the start I thought, this guy’s amazing, but I guess this is reality knocking on the door.”

In truth, he had become an upstart with a single Skill, and having heard he was trying to get his hands on the country, Damien had been wary. But after opening the box, he couldn’t help but shatter his previous impression.

Larc turned his eyes to Maksim, but…

“Sorry, uninterested. And you have a bounty on your head. You’ve played around too much with that Skill of yours.”

For Maksim, who seriously had no interest in any woman besides Adele, negotiations were impossible.

Larc held up his large sword in both hands.

“Dammit… making fun of me. I’m going to be king, waited on by

beauties, and the continent will… dammit… dammit allllll!!”

Holding that large black sword aloft, he cut at Erhart before him. Maybe due to the Magic Tool part of the sword’s effect, black flames emerged, and wrapped around the blade.

Larc’s movements grew sharper, and his muscles swelled. With such a large movement, if lowered on Erhart, the momentum looked as if it would cleave him in two.

On that strike, Erhart turned his sword diagonally to avert it. His blade let off sparks as it was greatly chipped, and melted away.

He had lost almost all the blade, making his sword much lighter. Gripping the hilt, Erhart struck Larc in the face.

Lightly taking to the air, Larc was shocked by the pain. Up to now, in his body enhanced by Skill, he had never felt pain of this extent before.

Inspecting the cause, he saw the Erhart’s muscles has swelled, and he was letting off heat. Steam was building up around him, and there was no doubt it was a body-enhancement Skill.

“Y-you third rate!!”

But even so, Erhart’s sword was in no state to use. And because of that, Larc thought he could win. Cutting Erhart down, he would make a straight cut through the knights and soldiers, fleeing from this site.

At that moment, Damien sitting on the box didn’t show any signs of movements. But he muttered.

“Okay, you’re surprisingly good. Looks like you’re a better man than I thought.”

There, Larc made a horizontal slash with his blade, but it looked as if Erhart had disappeared from his eyes. Also owing to how he had looked away, he was late to notice Erhart stooping over.

“Dam…”

“… I hate to admit it, but it’s just as he said.”

Erhart pulled a dagger from his belt, and stabbed it into Larc's chest.

As blood flowed out, he lost the ability to use his Skills. His power rapidly declined, and his sword fell to the floor.

When Erhart pulled out the dagger pierced in, he crouched, and frantically pressed his hand to stop the blood flowing out.

"S-someone. Save me! I'm begging you!"

Looking around, he saw his comrades were back on their feet, and approaching. Noticing the one among them capable of healing magic, he felt relieved.

He was saved, he ended up thinking.

Without paying any mind to why their restraints had been undone.

And the woman he looked up at smiled.

"Go die already."

She said. Larc tried to use his own Skill in surprise. But having lost too much blood, he couldn't tap into his Mana.

"Eh? Ah… s-save…"

Surrounded by the cold eyes of women, Larc remain crouched… lowering his head as if to apologize, he drew his last breath…

❼

… Night was coming to its close.

Within all that, the adventurer party that had come to Cartaffs in order to attack Lyle's group couldn't hide their surprise when a report came from their comrade.

"Lyle's party took over Cartaffs Castle? They have at least five hundred troops, you say? What is the meaning of this? They're supposed to have left a majority of their forces at the Labyrinth!"

The leader man stood, and grasped the lapels of the adventurer who

had come to report.

The one who brought the info was of the two-man party set to watch over them.

When night came, Lyle's party made a move and attacked them, bound them, and abandoned them. And when they headed to the castle because of the ruckus, they found Larc's corpse hoisted.

"T-they really did have those numbers! They were hanging their flag from the castle ramparts, and…"

Letting the adventurer who answer through the pain fall to the floor, the leader held his head, and sat back in his chair.

"… He entered the castle? He took control of it? With only five hundred? How? The information on him… did the information dealer betray us?"

There's no way Beim's information dealers would sell info to Lyle, who was set to be cut off from the city.

With the small numbers Lyle had come to Cartaffs in, that had made him certain of it. Yet the result was that he had perfectly completed the surface requested.

"… We're fleeing Cartaffs at once."

When the leader said that, the gathered adventurers nodded, and immediately started preparing to flee.

They bragged they had enough force to win against Lyle. But after the foe had gotten the better of them, and taken Larc down, that was a different matter.

Was there a traitor among them? Didn't the enemy know of them from the start? Or perhaps he got his hands on information, and came to doubt them?

There was much to think about, but for now, it was dangerous to stay where they were. Everyone immediately went into pulling out, and a few were sent to the harbor to secure a boat beforehand. Money was no object. They merely wanted to get to Beim as soon

as possible.

With that on their minds, the adventurer party headed to the port, and there was Lyle lying in wait.

Surely enough, the knights and soldiers surrounding them were perfectly equipped, and the ship was off in the distance, preventing them from making a break for it.

Shuffling around, they were surrounded by those well-armed men, and when his count of them exceeded two thousand, the leader gave up on counting the enemy.

And Lyle was smiling. He smiled, and pulled a bundle of papers from the bag in his hands…

❼

The mood in the Jewel was the worst.

The Third even…

『What's with running is the only option… come at us for christ's sake. Become food for Lyle's growth.』

The Fifth sounded bored.

『Does it really matter if we crush them? We chipped away at Beim's forces. With those sorts of numbers, I doubt we'd have too many casualties. Well, we can just have their main members fight Lyle.』

The Seventh laughed as he praised the adventurers. No, he seemed to praise them as he slandered them.

『Wonderful, is it not? They learned their place, and ran away like rats. Well, let's just put them to good use… for Lyle.』

Milleia-san also sounded bored. This time, I had brought things in a boring direction for the ancestors, and I really couldn't feel any motivation from them.

『Hah… Lyle, show me a trump card or two.』

I looked at the adventurer party surrounded at the port, and took a bundle of papers from my bag. It was bound with a string, and quite a stack.

I confirmed it, put it back in the bag, and tossed it over to the leader of the party.

As he didn't move to collect it, I spoke with a smile.

"Pick it up. I didn't set a trap or anything. I'm a man to fight fair and square."

I mixed in some sarcasm as I said that, while the leader turned his eyes to a comrade. It seems he was motioning for him to check it. And after confirming its contents…

"… Leader."

The depressed adventure handed the stack of papers to the leader. The leader accepted it in shock. His hands were shaking, and he looked at me a number of times.

"What is the meaning of this? These are Guild documents!"

Guild documents obtained through Marianne-san, to be precise. They really were useful.

They knew full well the unique characteristics of the official forms of the Guild. It wasn't strange for any adventurer to know them. Their applications and other forms bore a resemblance, and the contents were filled in.

Information only the guild could ever know was filled in.

"You still don't get it? The one sold out wasn't me, it was you."

Hearing those words, the leader shook.

"Bull! We never went against the Guild. We were ordered to kill you, and even made considerable preparations for…"

In a calm expression, I spoke to him.

"And so? How did that go for you? It seems you still don't get it, so

I'll spell it out… you guys are already over."

The knights and soldiers made a path, and from there, the 'official' requestor, some nobles of Cartaffs came with bitter expressions.

They had put out the requests, and the ones who were dispatched for it were… the adventurer party. It was merely a surface request, so they had taken it too lightly. This Labyrinth specialized adventurer party rarely took this sort of request to go outside. If they were adventurers of the East Branch, they'd at least pretend they were working a bit.

It was a clear failure in personnel selection. They had turned their minds too much towards defeating us.

The nobles spoke.

"Not only did you fail, you hadn't even the mind to do the work."
"What cowards you must be to run away. It seems that Beim is making light of us."
"… You forgot something. Take it. In accordance with procedure, I'll be excercising the right given to me."

What was tossed over was a document in an envelope. On it was the lowest【E】Rank evaluation, and a form demanding money from Beim for a breach of contract.

What's more, it was quite a large penalty.

The conduct of the adventurers was listed in detail, and the part of them getting in my way alone was carefully omitted.

They waited for us at a bar, and moved around a place Queen Ludmilla was nowhere to be found. Without even searching, they hadn't even moved. Overtaken by we, who came much later, and when everything was over, they ran to leave the country.

Even if it was the best decision they could've made for me, seen from the outside, they were the worst adventurers you'd ever find.

The woman nearby me… her majesty laughed, and looked down over them.

“So they sent me adventurers who never seriously thought to rescue me. I see, this is a matter more than worth a protest. But in that case, the world will officially know of my own incompetence… hmm, no, that’s fine as well. I’ve grown tired of the queen’s seat. I’ll use this disgrace to take up a husband. So anyways, Lyle.”

I averted my eyes from her, cleared my throat, and continued on.

Damien was giving a broad grin.

“This is it. This is the Lyle I know.”

Maksim was fed up, on the contrary.

“Lyle-dono, when everyone was fighting… you’re the worst. And please don’t get anywhere near Adele-sama.”

Erhart’s party seemed unable to understand what was going on, as they fidgeted.

I looked at the adventurers.

“You’re over as adventurers. It isn’t just the worst evaluation. You’ve made the country of Cartaffs hostile to Beim. Well, the result doesn’t really matter though, does it? Because you were sold out from the start.”

When I waved my left hand, the surrounding soldiers and knights held up their weapons. Thinking it was a signal to attack, the leader tossed his own weapon aside.

He raised both his hands.

“Please wait! We were only sent in on the Guild’s orders! The request had a contract under the surface one, and we did plan to accomplish the main request once we had completed that! Believe me! We were only request to do it!”

On those words, I shot back.

“I’m sorry. I’m working under request right now as well. So there’s no helping it, it’s a request and all. No~ my heart sure aches. But it’s a request, so there’s no helping it. Isn’t that how it is?”

I won’t say any names. But perhaps it was my ancestors, or maybe not. Anyways, there were certain someones who wanted me to get back at the adventurers set to attack us.

And they were going to unleash that discontentment on Beim.

The Seventh sounded delighted in the Jewel.

『Very nice, Lyle! There are still some rough spots, but your skill in riling isn’t bad at all! So more! Give these adventurers even more despair! And from there on is the real game!』

In a situation where they couldn’t run away, the adventurers dropped to their knees, and started pleading for their lives. Seeing that, I lowered my hand.

“… When we get to the Guild, speak about everything honestly. You don’t know who’s an ally, or who’s an enemy, right? If you do that, at the very least, I guarantee your lives. Well, before that, I do have one one job for you.”

Who is an enemy, and who an ally… Beim may have become my enemy, but I’m sure I should have at least one ally out there. Or so they’d want to believe.

The leader listened to my words, and looked at one of his comrades. That individual nodded. He had used his Skill to see through whether my words were lies or not. And he nodded.

“Understood. We shall report everything honestly. So… I beg you. Help us. If you do, we will never go against you. We’ll even write a contract! We’ll present you all the weapons we have on hand!”

If they returned to Beim, I’m sure they at least had their spares, and they were a party with enough power to instantly get their equipment together. Doing something like that wasn’t really meaningful.

“Then I’ll start you on that contract. As a fellow adventurer, I understand the importance of equipment. All I want is for you to speak honestly in Beim.”

Well, I’ll be having them use those weapons, so it’ll be troublesome if

they don’t have them.

Everyone was relieved.

And as I threatened the adventurer party like that, Ludmilla-san watched over me all smiles.

What could it be… I feel I’ve been caught in a trap this time around.

Those Who Move

… A large crater was made in the ground, and in it, with her two golden horns with split tips out, May lay without moving.

Her mouth spat up blood, and her eyes were empty.

The perpetrator who'd made that crater, Marina, breather roughly as she leaped all the way over to May. She landed, and to lay the final blow, she raised her hairy arm, and extended her claws…

… Jumped back, and took some distance from her.

Narrowing her eyes, she raised a growl.

"Gggrrrrrrrrrruuuuu."

Extended canines, the lycanthropic form of a beast walking on two legs. The instinct of Marina, in her Skill's second form was the wild itself.

May let her golden horns glow, as she leisurely stood. She spat blood, and after wiping her mouth, she pat at her clothing to remove the grime.

"You've got good instinct, ma'am. You'd make it out in the wild. Of course…"

A single red line appeared across Marina's face.

A quilin horn protruded from the ground. May had extended her horn from her right hand, and stuck it in the ground, waiting for Marina to approach before commencing her attack.

"… Even I have a trumpcard or two. Fredricks taught me. Last resorts are to be saved away."

Putting her horn away, she did a somersault on the spot, and changed to her quilin form.

From a girl of small build, to a large-bodied scaled horse. A golden mane, with sharp horns extending from her forehead. At the same time, she grew her golden backwards-growing split-tip horns as well.

Not on the ground, she created a foothold in the air, and landed on it, charging electricity even more than ever before.

“Now, let’s get this started!”

Kicking the air, May charged at Marina. Unable to dodge in time, Marina crossed her arm protectors, and tried to block the attack.

But in impact, she was lifted into the air, crashing into a tree, and then another, mowing a few down in her path, and when she finally came to a stop, her beaten body was embedded in the trunk of a great tree.

“You sure are sturdy. Normally, you’d be mincemeat.”

Fed up as she was at that durability, May was also impressed. In her original unhumanoid form, this was the power she could exhibit.

And still stuck in the tree, Marina let a laugh towards the sky.

“Aha, ahahaha!!”

Did she lose it? When May thought that and looked, Marina’s body had started to change once more.

“… Onto the third form? That’s fine, I don’t mind keeping you company.”

May watched Marina. Her overcoat flew off, and her muscles swelled to such an extent her shirt’s stitching began to snap. Her injured parts, and even her broken bones had rapidly begun to regenerate.

Her boots were blown off, and her arm guards and knee guards fell off as well. Perhaps they were heavier than they looked, as they

embedded deeply into the ground.

“Fwooh…!”

Her body hair grew, and when she finally thought she had taken her final monstrous form, that body was immediately swallowed by flames, and set alight. What emerged from the blaze wasn’t that monstrous form from before. Just a little taller than the usual Marina… a well-balanced beast-woman.

Rationality could be felt from her eyes, and on top of that, her body had been enhanced with Mana. She touched a hand to her neck, and made a cricking sound, as she twisted it back and forth.

Wearing nothing but pants and shirt.

“Now you’re finally looking the part.”

On May’s words, Marina laughed.

“I know, right? I can’t help but have to pass through the Second Stage to get her. And when I go that far, most opponents are already dead, and it’s over. But if that form realizes it can’t win, I finally get back my rationale. It’s quite nice, this Skill… let’s me enjoy battle. Makes sure the opponent isn’t one where it’s over before I realize it!”

Jumping up, Marina closed in on May in an instant. But May lowered her body, and tried to pierce her through with her horns.

The moment she thought she’d stick in…

“… Hey, you’re wide open.”

Twisting her body in midair, her sharp claws grazed May’s flank, and left a mark. They broke through her scales, skimmed the meat, and released the flow of red blood.

Skillfully jumping among the trees, Marina started into hit-and-run tactics to chip May away. Leading her to believe she was lacking in a decisive blow.

“Che!”

May raced into the sky. Marina narrowly passed her by, falling, and hitting the ground feet-first, making a large crater form around her.

Perhaps she had even more power than her reasonless state, as the way she gouged out the ground below her was strange.

A large indent had been made for Marina alone. And from that crater ten meters across, Marina looked up at the sky as she rose through it, approaching May.

Moving her body freely through the air, she landed in a fist, and a kick.

Unthinkable for a human.

May was sent a distance, making a foothold in air to recover her posture. Falling to the ground, Marina looked at May's form, and laughed.

"Girly… you're nothing special. If that's all you are, then you're still weaker than a dragon."

Among the monsters, the race of dragons held a meaning. They were counted as the strongest point of monsters, and those that defeated dragons were the heroes admired by children everywhere.

What's more, Marina was alone… a solo adventurer. To exterminate a dragon alone, she really was a human you could call a monster.

May spoke.

"… So you're a dragon killer? But do you think I've never fought a human like that?"

May's body let out light again…

7

… It was the station of the rear forces of the mercenary brigade.

There were tents prepared prepared, and around, the adventurers looked excitedly at the Valkyrie equipment being brought in.

The smiths and other workers were extremely busy with the broken weapons.

In one of the tents, the Valkyries stripped of equipment were loaded. The Valkyries the mercenary brigade had collected were thrown and piled like a mountain.

The ones collected by the adventurer party were tidily lined up. Even if they were adventurers all the same, these differences of handling came out.

And in that tent, a two-man adventurer party entered.

Neither had any decent equipment. They were working at the bottom of the brigade, and they had diverted the surrounding eyes to enter the tent.

“Oy, if we take their parts and return, they’ll sell for a lot, right?”
“From what I’ve heard, they were made by a famous blacksmith. So it wouldn’t be strange if they sold for a fortune.”

You couldn’t call the two particularly smart. As they looked upon the mountain of Valkyries stripped of all but their undergarments, they swallowed their spit.

“H-hey.”
“Yeah, that’s right. It’s not like anyone’ll know if they’ve been used. Taking out one in good condition, and having some fun isn’t…”

The two with a minimal salary didn’t have the funds to commute to the brothel. And besides their arms and legs, the Valkyries of beautiful flesh were existences the two couldn’t resist. Not taken seriously among their comrades, and mocked by female adventurers, the two of them took out a Valkyrie.

“I-is this one fine?”
“Then I’ll just…”

Saying that, and extending his hand, his arm was grasped y the Valkyrie that suddenly sprung to motion. The eyes of the piled Valkyries opened, and their red pupils glowed as they began shuffling about the dim tent.

Those with their heads bent at impossible angles.

Those with swords and spears stuck through their beaten bodies.

The adventurers had no idea how to unfasten their arms and legs, so with them still attached, the Valkyries stood with unsettling movements, and came down on the two adventurers before their eyes.

Attacked by many, they lost their lives without being able to utter a sound.

“… I-it is… time.”
“This body’s movem ents are… as expected, our internal flu… id…”
“Profess or… Damien and boss Letarta… will re pair…”

Making metallic groans, and unnatural movements, to carry out the scheduled actions, took out the metal cylinders hidden within their arms.

After which they took some cylinders filled with gunpowder.

“… The East Bra nch… sur vives.”
“A portion… es… cape.”

Clink clank, whirrrrrrr… entangled in the tent, from the mountainous pile of Valkyries, one and then another stood to go outside.

It was night.

Right on time, the Valkyries moved.

Setting the bombs in their hands alight, they blew up wherever the important materials were kept, and attacked the men. In that place of gathered mercenaries and adventurers, it had instantly become hell.

Even if they were pierced through with weapons, or burned by magic, the Valkyries that continued moving started causing the adventurers to flee out of fear…

… Sensing an irregularity, the chief turned around.

He had the feeling he heard a strange sound.

His subordinate nearby looked over the magicians firing magic with the same pattern to conquer the third fort they'd encountered.

"Oh look, seems they've put up some countermeasures. I guess you get used to it after a few days."

Hearing his smiling subordinate's words, the chief put a hand to his chin.

A few days.

In these past few days, Marina had continued fighting the quilin. If you were too close, you'd get dragged in, but he had put people to observe them from afar, so there was no doubt about it.

From how that quilin didn't flee, there was no doubt she had some sort of relation with Lyle's party. And after making the first fortress fall, they got their preparations sufficiently together, before conquering the second.

By the Third fort, the enemy had seen through the mercenary brigade's tactics, and had put up countermeasures.

"… Even so, they hold out well."

It wasn't just a magic barrier, they dealt with each individual magic soming at them. For the water, they deployed ice to kill the momentum, and with the ice strengthened by the water, it would stop the rocks.

The flames had no effect either, and no matter how many times they tried it, it was blocked.

With a repetition of such actions, only time was going by. The chief planned to wait for his foes to exhaust themselves. Of all else, in numbers, his was the greater.

Having them endure and wear out, he need only overrun them, he thought. But the leader was the one not able to endure it anymore.

“Isn’t it strange? It’s true it’s been smooth sailing up to now, but come this far, we’ve suddenly stagnated. Is this how it usually is?”

For they, who specialized in Labyrinth work, and never went out for mercenary jobs, rather than placing importance on the site, they stressed information and the method. Even if it looked futile at a glance, if it were a necessary action, he didn’t like how inefficient it seemed.

“In that case, do you lot have any good ideas?”

“Our offense is too monotone. How about we try something more effective? If ice is coming out… then melt it away?”

The adventurer party, having obtained some Valkyries, thought they had earned an amount they were satisfied with. But the chief was different.

To maintain a force on a large scale, a small profit wasn’t enough. Burning everything away with fire may have him lose his precious treasures.

“Rejected. Like this, we’ll wait for the enemy to wear themselves out.”

The leader shrugged his shoulders. Seeing that, the chief was irritated. An adventurer oblivious to the battlefield shouldn’t open his mouth on it, he thought.

And irritatingly enough, Lyle’s party’s resistance had grown to heights he had rarely seen before.

“Damn, it’s as if we’re attacking a fortified castle. Are there really just a few dozen of them?”

On the chief’s words, his subordinate laughed.

“Well, however they go about it, their limit will come. It’s about right time they slump over, isn’t it?”

There was no sign of such a thing, so the chief couldn’t help but feel something was very, very wrong…

❼

… A humanoid form.

Covered from the arms to the thighs in blue scales, the form of an adult woman. It was May.

Her long golden hair swayed, and that form with golden horns looked like the assimilation of man and beast.

Ironically enough, she had arrived at the same point as Marina's Skill.

They exchanged punches and kicks, sending one flying, being sent flying…

It was practically a fight of those beyond humanity.

Unlike Marina's wild ecstacy, May was level-headed to the end.

"Splendid, girly! That form of yours is just like mine!"

Power, speed, with all those limiters removed, the two of them clashed, bringing atrocity to the surrounding forest.

But when night fell, and May looked at the blazing point a distance away, she led out a sigh.

"… Now then, is it about time I end this?"

While she spoke the same, her form more curvaceous than usual boasted a high stature. Her usual attire had gone from cute to sexy on that body.

Looking at Marina, May spoke.

"It was fun. But it wasn't enough, ma'am… at the very least, I've fought a human like you four times so far. You're just the fifth."

Marina kicked the ground, and May kicked the air, the two of them meeting in the middle. Twisting her body, Marina launched a kick.

That kick that seemed it would slice even the air away came from

May’s human form in a straightforward attack.

The impact shook the surrounding air, and Marina was slammed on the ground.

Marina’s elbow she intended to pierce through hadn’t hit anything.

“… That was my best, so I’ll praise you for surviving.”

Her body slowly shrunk and once back in human form, Marina looked at May and laughed.

“K-kill me.”

She looked completely satisfied. Saying she had no regrets left behind, she was a self-centered warrior to the very end.

May released a shimmed light to her surroundings, as she steadily took on her smaller human form. Returning to the usual May, she gave a yawn.

“I’m sorry. You’re of the East Branch, so I can’t kill you. I was fighting with the intent to kill, but as I thought, you were strong.”

When May said that with a smile, Marina’s expression showed she didn’t know what was going on as she closed her eyes…

A Tiger at the Front Gate, a Wolf at the Back

… By the time they noticed it, it was already too late.

The annihilation of their forces in the rear.

On top of that, the fort in front was full of individuals they hadn't planned for, and the enemies within it easily surpassed a thousand.

"How is Marina faring!?"

The chief raised a yell, seeking out verification from those around, but no one had a grasp of the situation. It had gone too well, they had grown negligent.

By the time the chief had noticed he had become negligent himself, it was too late.

He looked up at the fort walls. On it, the area in front of the center gate was built a bit higher. Interrupted by that, on the left stood a sea-blue haired level-headed looking woman in white clothing.

When they put up a ladder and tried to climb up, his climbing subordinates were frozen over.

On the other side, the adventurers of the adventurer party, who'd done much the same, were burned by a woman of snow-white hair.

A few days.

This fort was taking way too much time. They had arrived on the site three days after Lyle had set off. And two days after that, they attacked. In the next two days, they took two forts.

“They entered the depths of the forest, and the two we posted weren’t able to catch up, according to the report…”

“When! When did I get that report!?”

The chief lifted his subordinate up by the lapels. It seems he knew it was unreasonable himself, but before the current situation, he couldn’t bear to keep his composure.

“T-three days ago! Back then you said to let Marina—san do as she pleased…”

Throwing his subordinate aside, the chief thought.

(If Marina lost, the quilin should have come at us by now. They’d have been able to pincer us. Decided not to? What does it mean?)

Even if a single quilin attacked him, while it would definitely take casualties, they could win, for what it was worth. It was impossible for the mercenaries, but they had adventurers that had fostered each of their individual’s powers in the Labyrinth.

Drawing the short straw, and after Marina was defeated, taking on a worn-out quilin wasn’t bad either, or so the chief thought.

But his beaten comrades at the rear had notified him the back forces had been annihilated.

And once they launched an offense on the weakening fortress, the ones to come out were…

“Cut the crap! Why are those gals here? Even like that, they’re the representatives of entire countries!!”

The chief looked atop the wall. There, were the forms of Elza and Gracia looking down over them. The flags of both countries had been hoisted around, and their knights and soldiers had even joined the fray.

He didn’t know the precise numbers, but he could see they weren’t scarce enough to lose to his forces. If he fired magic, it was all blocked, and with little trouble, his side had started to be pushed back…

❼

… Novem looked down over the enemy from atop the wall.

“It’s around the right time. The Valkyries did their job well.”

Dispersal of forces.

It was a poor move, but what Novem had accomplished through it was buying time. May had returned a few days prior, and perhaps she was tired, as she had stuffed her stomach with wagons of food, and fallen asleep.

Defeating Marina, the trump-card-like talent of the East Branch, the achievement of keeping her alive, and bringing her along was a large one.

And for that sake, no one requested any more from her. Of course, May’s job was over, and after that, she only had to watch over Marina.

The Valkyries bought time, and expended the equipment at the enemy camp, buying two whole days in two fortresses, and instilling negligence in the enemy side.

After that, they only needed to endure at their main stronghold. Defending against the magic attacks, and acting as if they were wearing out bought a few days on top of that.

Standing near Novem, Monica spoke with a motivation-less expression.

“… Lately, I’ve been doing nothing but look after the knights and soldiers in the Labyrinth. Not taking care of the Chicken Dickwad, just what am I doing with my life…”

They had them hide in the Labyrinth, and had Monica and the remaining Valkyries look after them. It seems the enemy had adventurers capable of recon, so they had a good grasp of the movements within the fort.

But they didn’t go as far as to check the Labyrinth, it seems.

Novem thought.

(Well, I was worried over what means they'd use to scout us, but it's a good thing they didn't notice.)

Unrest had formed on the opposing side, and there weren't any signs of further attack. Having some scores of attackers frozen and burned was enough to drop one's motivation.

The ones who had attacked were to them, their elites. But those elites were torn down by Elza and Gracia.

"Clara, I leave the light to you."

As Novem said that, Clara at the base of the wall, let light from her staff. And after taking a large swing with it, she flung that light into the sky.

That light spun in the air, dispersed, and lit the surroundings. And like that, that fort in the forest secured some vision.

It was easy to see the scene around. The fleeing mercenaries and adventurers. Novem looked at the forest, and spoke.

"That decision isn't mistaken, but… your mistake was abiding the Guild's orders, and going against Lyle-sama. Did you seriously believe we would let you get away? No, I'm sure they do."

In the city of Beim that could be thought the center of the world, when attached to such a large organization, there were some things one couldn't see. Precisely because of their authority, they offered blind trust towards the Guild.

When Novem was about to start moving, Elza and Gracia wandered over to her.

"… I'm sorry, but about that matter."

Gracia looked a little embarrassed, as she lightly fiddled her finger through her hair, and sought confirmation from Novem. Novem responded with a smile.

"Yes, it's alright. You've helped out greatly with these

reinforcements, and the port, so I'll put in a good word to Lyle-sama."

Seeing Gracia's relief, Elza panicked.

"What about me!"

"I understand. A little longer, and some free time will open up for Lyle-sama, so at that point, he'll be going around the four-country alliance. I'll extend his stay in Galleria and Rusworth. Though he'll lose time in Lorphys in kind."

Only Lorphys' treatment was terrible, but there were circumstances behind it. That the royal princess had yet to give up on Lyle, and that those around, seeing the four-way alliance, were moving to remove some obstacles.

To Novem, she definitely couldn't recognize the marriage of Lyle, and the princess who didn't clear the Walt House Precepts.

"I-I see! Then that matter will go as promise, but… are you really alright with that? To your side, I can't think it'll give a very good result at all."

When Elza said that, Novem nodded and spoke. Monica let out a sigh, as she descended the wall to move. Mumbling complaints of, 'I wanna see my chicken. Lately, I've only ever been getting this sort of treatment,' under her breath.

"There is no problem about it. More so, what's important is the Trēs House under Fidel-dono, after all."

Saying that, Novem walked off…

❼

… Inside the forest.

The mercenaries and adventurers that fled were bound in Miranda's sticky thread.

Eva and Aria were accompanying her, and Eva had a few dozen

elves following her.

Before the mercenary men trying to flee at all costs, Miranda felt a tug on a string from her right hand.

“Another one got caught. Do they still think the path they came by is safe?”

She had lain traps on the path they used in their invasion, and waited for an opportunity. Sure they would run away, but she had set other ones as well.

However a majority returned by that same path, so the other ones weren’t getting much love.

Eva stroked her hair.

“I think it’ll be hard not to for the non-elves, you know? Can’t help it in this lighting.”

The reason she obtained the cooperation of the elves was to oppose the other elves. They were the elves living in the forest, and Eva had negotiated to make them allies. To add onto that, all of them boasted skin of brown complexion.

A young-looking elf spoke to Eva in what sounded like a well-aged voice.

“Daughter of Nihil. As promised, our young ones have captured their elves. East Branch, was it? None of them were part of it, so we dealt with them.”

Miranda asked that elf… that dark elf.

“I thought you got along better as a race. Weren’t elves supposed to have a strong sense of camaraderie?”

Eva stifled a laugh.

“We lose to humans in that regard.”

The elder dark elf was the same.

“If assistance is necessary, then help at once. But if they’re enemies,

then kill. Simple, isn't it? We're not good at complex dealings like humans, but elves and dwarves will war if it's necessary. True as it may be it's much less when compared to humans."

Hearing the elder's tale, Aria let out a sigh.

"You're destroying my image here. I really thought you got along better, you know? The singer elves look like they get along fine."

The elder smiled.

"You can't make a living in human society by snarling at one other, right? Precisely the sort of necessity I was talking about."

Miranda looked satisfied with that answer, as she reconfirmed.

"Kill as few humans of the East Branch as possible. And purposely let some ot the others slip away. Also…"

On Miranda's words, interrupted.

"… Make sure you show them a scene where only the East Branch adventurers are forgiven before they flee, right? I know. It's to keep ownership of our own forest. We'll honor the promise. But if you're to break your side…"

It wasn't Miranda, but Eva who swore to him.

"By the name of Nihil, I'll make Lyle honor the promise. A portion of the forest shall be recognized and offered as the village of dark elves. But our current base will expand some, so it will be a portion further away."

The elder nodded.

"That is fine. For us as well, it's best to take distance when dealing with humans. We'll respect each other's rules."

The elves living in the forests. But even if they managed their forests, there were tribes that had lost it all in the Labyrinth rampage. Such tribes had flowed about, and as they were searching for a new way of life, Eva had come to know them.

In that Labyrinth out of control in a neighboring land, they had lost

their own forest. And to take them in, Lyle had cut an empty promise.

He proclaimed he would offer a land that didn't even belong to him.

Miranda was aware of that, but she didn't open her mouth.

"Then let's go and search for others. Ah, those people are…"

Before Miranda could give any orders, the dark elves had ceased the breath of some mercenaries. Having lost their place to live, seeing them so desperate, Miranda thought.

(Lyle, this really is fine, right? If it doesn't work out, we'll have to prepare them some other land, or else… but in most cases, the good places are all already taken up by elves.)

It's also been said that they were good places *because* the elves were there. Because the elves were a race that looked after their forests.

Miranda felt a little anxious as she hastened onwards…

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Nearby the base for Labyrinth Subjugation, there was a spot suitable for a port.

So not to Beim, I had the ship steered there, but…

"What's with this armada?"

Turning back, I saw a number of ships beyond the Vera Trēs, almost like a full fleet. In truth, there were some warships equipped with cannons among them, so that wasn't a mistake. The Vera Trēs also had cannons loaded, so it's not like you couldn't call it a state-of-the-art battleship.

When I turned my eyes back to the number of men using dinghies to head for land, Ludmilla-san wearing a white coat put an arm over my shoulders.

“You sure are talented. Even if it was Support Class, looking at the effect, you’re a talent I’d kill to get on my staff. Hey, once you’re done with work, come over to Cartaffs. I’ll raise a ceremony at once to give you the throne.”

I averted my eyes, and endured the sensation of her breasts.

“U-um… I’m from the Walt House of your country’s hated enemy, Bahnseim, and what’s more, I’ve been driven out, so I doubt it will work out.”

When she came on so assertively, I was troubled to counteract. From the Jewel came some customer complaints. It was the Third.

『Why are you pulling back!? That’s where you go on the counteroffense! It may just be that she’s just putting up a strong front!』

But Milleia-san instantly denied it.

『No, if you push this girl, she’ll devour him up before he knows what’s going on. She’s a wild beast, an animal! I want to give Lyle’s precious first to Miranda. So Lyle… keep it vague, get home, and hold Miranda tight.』

The Fifth was taken aback.

『You… were that sort of person? I mean, up to now, per say, weren’t you a little more graceful in your life?』

Milleia-san laughed.

『Hah? When dear brother isn’t here, what need have I to act? Well, before that man, I felt too guilty to put out my base. This sort of… you know, how he tried so hard in his fruitless efforts, that part of him was adorable.』

But from the Seventh’s point of view, it seems a marriage of me and Ludmilla-san was well-balanced.

『Isn’t it fine? I mean, she’s queen of the large northern country of Cartaffs. Worthy of Lyle, who carries royal blood, is she not? Rather, speaking to status, she’s number one. She’s the leading

candidate for legal wife anyways…』

From the Jewel. I heard the sound of gunpowder igniting, and all was silent. I've come to notice it these days, but the exchanges between the Seventh and Milleia were almost a form of intimacy or… no, I'm reading too far into it.

"The Walts of Bahnseim, right? Isn't that fine? Cartaffs' arch nemesis of Bahnseim. Even within it, the Walt house is a famed name. What's more, we've never directly fought. Being driven out intrigues me a little, but if you hadn't been, then I'd never have met you. If you think of it as fate, there's nothing wrong about it. While we're at it, having you as king to trample Bahnseim is fine too."

It's not like I'm fighting Bahnseim for revenge, but it's true I needed Cartaffs' support.

As that was happening, a voice called over from behind.

"Hey, I understand you've been through a lot, but could you explain it to me?"

Turning around, I saw Erhart with a black sword over his back.

Behind him, his comrades. Plus, the female adventurers that had been Larc's.

"… No, I explained it, didn't I? That sword is a special reward. I never thought Larc would be out and about at that time of night, so it's an apology. And as for the women, it'll be difficult to get them an acquittal in Cartaffs, but since Beim has the margin to take extenuating circumstance into consideration, we'll have them take charge of it."

Erhart screamed atop the ship.

"Then why did you stick them in our party!? Just have them go independent!"

I shook my head. Perhaps Ludmilla-san thought she would be in the way of this conversation, as she parted from me.

"We have to keep them under surveillance as well, and since you've

become a competent party, what better candidate? They said they were alright with that as well."

The reason that female battlement chose Erhart was because he freed them from Larc, apparently. And the women who saw the battle were charmed by a stoic(?) side of Erhart never seen in Larc. Apparently.

So when I asked them if they wanted to join Erhart's party, they were relatively on board.

To give my true motives, augmenting Erhart's party's war potential was also necessary for preparations to come. I'm not sure if this would be a success, but it held a possibility. So I put it to practice.

It's not because I didn't want to look after them or anything, okay. Definitely not.

"I… have no idea what to do! Having women in the party… you've raised the difficulty way too high!"

Hearing Erhart's honest feelings, I put a hand on his shoulder. When he was once so desperate to get a girl in the party, learning the truth, and getting it all together, I decided to support him.

I smiled, and gave him a thumbs up.

"Good luck with that. I've… Always wanted an adventurer friend who shared the same troubles as me."

When I said that, Erhart grabbed me. He grabbed my by the neck, around, and shook me violently back and forth, while no one around stepped in to stop it, looking on with a smile.

Who was Being Chased Again?

… The leader who'd run into the forest managed to reach the exit with a few of his reliable comrades.

A break in the trees… once they breached it, what they witnessed was the blazing sight of the camp without a hint of any moving men remaining.

After one confirmed the surroundings with their Skill.

"… Leader, there are three survivors."

In a place where there had been more than five hundred names, there were only three who survived. If they took flight, then that was fine, but looking at the situation, he couldn't tell how many were able to get away.

Black charred corpses littered the ground, and in that place where the stench was so harsh it made everyone drape clothes over their faces, the adventurers walked on.

They knew there were no enemy presences left around, as they had a member with such a Skill. Those reliable comrades had known the leader for many a year.

Heading for a survivor, they found a young man leaning on a crate that had yet to catch flame. A man who had been doing odd jobs under the mercenaries.

"Oy, get a hold of yourself."

After one of the adventurers fed him water, the odd-jobs man

opened his eyes.

“What happened?”

On the leader’s question, the man held his head, and wept as he spoke.

“Those things… those things woke up. They burned everything… and recovered their equipment. The guys who tried wearing women’s armor as a joke were…!”

He had seen quite a terrible scene, and his breathing was all over the place. And he left the leader an important fact.

“They asked everyone. Are you a member of the East Branch? … and after we showed our Guild Cards, only the East Branch adventurers were left to flee…”

Hearing that, the leader guessed those things meant the Valkyries. When he thought he had defeated them, they had only let themselves be defeated. Thinking over how terrible a means they’d used, he felt anxiety at how the East Branch was spared.

His comrades were of the same opinion. One spoke up.

“Leader, this is a troublesome one. It’s possible this was all a faction-war within the Guild. I knew it was strange. When they said to go teach the Hero of Fort Redant who saved us all a lesson.”

You don’t have to say it so late in the game, thought the leader, as he looked at his few surviving comrades. Not having made it through for nothing, they were all skilled members.

But thinking to the ones he had lost, it was unbearable.

(How many years will it take to get back on our feet from here? We’d finally breached the sixtieth floor, and been recognized as first rate, yet… three years? No. Five years at the very least. If things don’t work out, ten… even if I use my life to revive the party, I’ll be retiring first.)

Age-wise, he was a little passed his golden years. Even if he could fight without problem for the next few years, it wouldn’t go that way

any further than that. Reviving his party as first-rate was a hopeless prospect.

“… We’re returning to Beim. What of the dolls?”

As the leader stood, the odd-jobs man’s eyes pleaded to him. But the leader ignored it. Now wasn’t a time to save another.

A reliable adventurer looked around before shaking his head.

“There aren’t any nearby. Let’s go.”

Running right off with their few, the Leader headed for Beim…

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… Inside the forest.

The mercenary chief captured by dark elves had an arrow through his leg.

By the time he was dragged before Novem, the survivors had already reached an easily countable number.

The mercenaries bound by Miranda’s threads.

Novem sent a glance to the back of a tree a little ways away, and perhaps the dark elves understood something from that, as they surrounded the immobile men.

The chief was kicked over, and collapsed in front of Novem. Looking up at her, he gave a wide grin.

“How about you show a bit more charm, girly? You could at least show me the insides of your skirt before I go. Well, I’m not expecting much from a woman who’s made it as an adventurer. Though if you were a harlot, I assure you’d be popular.”

Hearing that vulgar laugh and provocation, she understood her opponent had resolved himself for death. You could also say his senses had dulled towards that called the end.

To such a chief, Novem produced a bundle of papers from her bag, and left them on the ground so they'd be clearly visible.

At first wondering what sort of papers they were, and hoping for the prospect of survival. But upon inspecting them, a wrinkle descended on his brow.

"Who was it. Who betrayed us!?"

The chief glared at Novem, and yelled out. What was written were the details on the mercenary brigade… the information maintained by the Guild.

With the format, and the information on them from other guilds as well, it didn't look like anything any information dealer could have gathered and written up.

The chief instantly suspected a traitor, but Novem spoke expressionlessly.

"No one betrayed anyone from the start. That it would come to this was but an inevitability."

Novem hadn't spoken a lie. The Guild had no intent to betray the adventurers they'd chosen as attackers, and from the start, it was only that Lyle's party had information from the start, and prepared for their victory.

The chief was mortified.

"… I beg of you! Take me back to Beim. There's no way I can forgive it! No way in hell I'd forgive the bastard who set me up! If it's money, I've some hidden in the city! So let's join hands! We'll teach that guild how scary we…"

He had been dragged into a factional war of the Guild. It seems that's how the chief felt.

Right after he said that, by the three Valkyries… Units One, Two and Three, he was stuck through with spears.

Novem looked over the scene.

“There is no need. We will be having you all disappear here. I won’t let a single one return alive. And it seems you’ve been mistaken.”

Novem leaned over for him, and smiled.

“The verdict on Beim is unanimous. That is all.”

Upon hearing those words, the chief’s face twisted in despair, as he retired his breath. Around him, the mercenaries who’d witnessed the scene began pleading for their lives at once, but…

“You’ve run amuck as much as you pleased. You should’ve understood what would happen if you ever lost, right? And over those that beg for their lives, I prefer those that fight on to the end. How unfortunate for you.”

The Valkyries held weapons in their hands, ending all the adventurers who’d survived.

At that moment, an unnatural sound came from a tree a little away. But no one tried to turn towards it.

After Novem said to clear away the bodies, she gave an order to retreat from the site.

At the end, after sending a glance to the adventurer hiding in the tree…

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The adventurer party that said they would help in Cartaffs.

On top of five hundred Gallerian soldiers. And five hundred soldiers of Cartaffs. Using that many spare hands, we took a break on the road leading to Beim’s territory.

We had split into a number of units, to lay in wait.

There, one of the fleeing adventurer parties headed over to us.

“Please help us! We’re being chased!”

I was wearing a hood, and on those words, I removed it.

“Would the ones chasing you happen to be my comrades? I mean, you’re… the ones who launched the attack, right?”

When I said that with a smile, the adventurers’ faces froze.

But one among them was an adventurer of the East Branch. I’d seen his face a number of times around the Guild, and I nodded.

“Ah, that person can pass. Good work over there.”

When I said that, the adventurers’ eyes gathered on one.

“Eh? Ah… huh?”

He seemed to be confused, so I issued orders with a smile.

“Please give him a share of water and food. There’s a distance to Beim, so would it be best we at least give him a dagger? Ah, would you like some rest first?”

When the East Branch adventurer nodded awkwardly, he was led further in. And to the other adventurers.

“Now the rest of you are over. Good work to you as well.”

One of them gave a protest.

“Don’t screw with me! Why is he to survive, and we… could it be that from the start…!”

I looked over the adventurers from some other branches, and spoke.

“And so? When you’re attacking someone’s comrades, you better not have thought you’d be left alive if you lost, right? Don’t you think that sounds just a little strange?”

There, the adventurer put a hand on his weapon, and faced me.

I put a hand to my Katana hilt, but the one to move first was Ludmilla-san. Drawing her long sword, its red blade warped like a whip and expanded.

It moved as if it had a will, and carved into the adventurers in an

instant. The adventurers collapsed, and Lumilla-san walked a little away.

The sword had already returned to its original form

“You sure do some terrible things. Or should I say, well thought out.”

While I thought she would a bit unnerved, Ludmilla-san looked like she was having fun. Rather, this person was definitely wealthy in battle experience. Even when cutting down humans, she wasn’t perturbed in the slightest.

“… It’s to win.”

When I said that, Ludmilla-san laughed.

“Does it weigh on your mind? If you can carry out such a plan regardless, I’ll rate you highly. You’re a man who carries through when the time comes for it.”

I don’t think myself kind. But it’s true that here I was, weighed down by it. I wonder if my heart is weak?

As I thought that, Milleia-san let her voice from the Jewel.

『Lyle, regret it after you’ve done what you must. You can have your regrets once it’s over.』

And delightedly spoke the Seventh.

『Nice. Strong, and a Queen who doesn’t just spit pretty words… her bloodline’s also the best. Lyle, make Ludmilla the legal wife.』

There, the Third gave a protest.

『Hold it right there! I won’t say it has to be Clara-chan. But back when Lyle was helpless, Novem-chan is the one who sold her dowry to make money! Not making her the legal wife… I definitely won’t permit it!』

Within a Jewel heating up. As the Third and Seventh exchanged intense argument, the Fifth alone was doing things at his own pace.

『… The ocean, you know. It would’ve been nice if that Divine Beast

whale was a bit smaller, you know. Then it should have been more fun. I don't care about legal wives, but I think a small whale is a yes.』

I ignored the conversations of the Jewel, as I used the Skill… Search… to detect the next approaching group. I immediately raised its stage to Spec and Real Spec to view information on the other party.

They were adventurers who were central members of Labyrinth Subjugation.

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… The Trēs House's manor.

There, the ones who had jumped on board Gina's thoughts were surrounding Fidel.

Vera and Fidel surrounded together, and those sympathetic to Fidel were surrounded as well.

Those called the military force of the Trēs House had sided with Gina as well.

To Gina's side, wearing a specially given suit, Roland was sweating profusely with the collar of his shirt loosened.

He looked nervous.

Vera glared at Gina as she spoke.

"Gina, you understand what you're doing, do you?"

The younger sister Gina looked at her sister Vera, and made just a bit of a regretful expression. Lately, she'd been trying her best to talk her and Fidel out of it.

But even when it had come down to brute force, she never thought a majority of the staff would side with her. Fidel looked at his subordinates, feigning a calm composure, but inside, he was surely feeling indignation.

Roland was quite the same.

Fidel spoke.

“I was expecting great things from you, but for you to aim for the Trēs House head’s seat like this. You aren’t enough to fill it. Gina, it isn’t too late. Please rethink this.”

Gina shook her head.

“The one who doesn’t understand is you, father. In the Beim of today, there are plenty of houses who aren’t too pleased with the Trēs House’s newly-gained rights. It’s because you monopolize them while understanding all of that, that there are those coming out to destroy the house!”

Within Beim, there were movements against the Trēs House, whose power had suddenly expanded. But to Vera and to Fidel, there was no way they didn’t know that already.

“And so we give up our interest? Don’t be stupid! The ones who invested in Lyle were only a small portion of merchants, starting with the Trēs House. If we yield to the folks demanding a share after the pie’s been cut, it’s plainly visible we’ll only be taken from again and again henceforth.”

Vera, who’d rode ships around the world, and watched the work.

But Gina’s opinion was different.

“So the Trēs House grows bigger, and you plan to be the substantial rulers of Beim? To support a house so big, just who will you ask to be your sacrifice? You have it nice, Vera! Supporting that man, and succeeding in sales! Even father, if he makes it big enough, surely father will recognize your marriage. But what about me!? For the sake of the Trēs House, will I be marrying a man I don’t even love? Will I be pushed into the crowd?”

Fidel didn’t deny that. The reason being, Lyle aside, when even now Roland wasn’t a match with her present status, if the Trēs House grew larger, if the House grew any larger, there was no way the

other merchants would keep quiet about Gina's marriage.

It wasn't possible to push a marriage with Lyle aside, but what about Gina? There were many folks who thought that, and Fidel was also a merchant. There's no way he would choose Roland.

"… Gina, it's not as if I haven't recognized Roland. He's proficient and diligent. But he's too straight-forward to lead a merchant house. He isn't of a caliber to hold up the Trēs House. You understand how it's not all about pretty words, don't you?"

Fidel had given an eye to Roland as well. Earnest, and devoted to his work. So he had lived his life close to the house, and he had plenty of chances to come into contact with Vera and Gina.

But he was a talent not suited for head.

Gina seemed to understand that as well. So she spoke.

"Then I need only make it a weight he can support. We'll pull our hand from a number of enterprises. I've always thought our weapons industry was unnecessary. And I've already had a talk with the other merchant houses."

Vera, upon hearing that.

"Do you understand the meaning of that? It isn't just a problem of the House. What of the craftsmen and customers who've known us all these years?"

Fidel, within all of that.

"She says. Now if you're done with that little talk… Roland, you bastard!"

Roland lowered his head towards Fidel.

"I deeply apologize! But Beim intends to crush Lyle-san. To set an example for the House. Any more, and a violent faction war really will go on in Beim. I can't stand to see blood flow."

Hearing that, Fidel looked at his subordinates.

"So you intentionally withheld that information from me? No wonder it

felt so quiet. Even the ones I sent to reaffirm it… you planned to watch your employer fall to ruin!?”

Those you could call the dark side of the Trēs House were assisting Gina. To both Vera and Fidel, that was simply strange. If their employer’s scale grew smaller, their treatment was sure to change.

“Roland, you don’t get it. What’s wrong if blood flows in Beim alone? The way things are going, Beim will light the surrounding sparks once more, and raise the flames of war. In the worst case, they’ll rile up Bahnseim! Do you think it fine if only Beim is at peace!?”

As Vera was disappointed in Roland’s narrow field of vision, Fidel spoke to Gina.

“Gina, stop this. You can still make it in time. Beim is more dangerous than you could ever have imagined. It’s relied too much on war. Why can’t you understand it’s finally the time for Beim to get itself in order!?”

There, a man in black clothing opened his mouth.

“But that’ll be troubling, Fidel-sama.”

“You’re…”

That former adventurer man was wearing a hood, and his face wasn’t visible.

“I’ve got some connections of my own. There are folks out there who can only live in war. After selling so many weapons, you’re not putting on a good guy mask are you? Moderate war is a necessity.”

Moderate war. Hearing that, Fidel spoke.

“You lot really aren’t seeing the situation. Or have you lost your nerve!?”

Gina looked at Fidel, and spoke sorrowfully.

“The ones without eyes are my father and sister. So the Trēs House doesn’t shed blood in a factional dispute, so blood doesn’t flow through the streets of Beim, I’m certain it is fine if the Trēs House

shrinks in scale."

In a sense, Gina's opinion was correct. Thinking of the residents living in Beim, they were the ones who would be tangled up and devoured in a war of merchant and guild.

But outside Beim was different.

Vera turned a tired look to Gina.

"You… think the world is all in Beim? And you're just throwing on a reason to make the scale smaller for Roland's sake, aren't you?"

Gina didn't say anything. Vera had hit the mark. But it was a fact she was thinking of Beim.

Fidel spoke to persuade her.

"Gina, the situation has already changed! The surrounding countries have gotten together, and a power beyond our means now borders us. The means that passed up to now won't work any more. Putting out money and goods, leaving the rest to the mercenaries isn't enough anymore! Have you ever thought of how the outsiders see Beim!?"

But Gina's will was solid.

"… I shall deprive father of his status as head. I've gone through the talks at the merchant conference, so Roland shall immediately be instated as the next head. His marriage to me, or at least the formalities could even take place tomorrow. Father, sister… you'll be taking a leave from Beim. I don't mind if you take your ship that's close to completion, or Vera's ship either. I won't be able to manage them myself."

Fidel crumbled at the knees.

He was remaining wary of his surroundings, but he never thought his daughter would betray him.

And Vera muttered.

"… Lyle, your prediction hit the mark."

Making an enemy of Gina, Beim had seriously come in to crush them. Vera, who had been informed of all that beforehand, hadn't imagined Gina would go that far.

"I took her lightly."

Vera supported up her falling father, and spoke to the subordinates.

"… It is as you see. Those who'll stay with us, follow along. You'll likely be driven from Beim, but if you're alright with that, we'll take you along. Come on, you too Father!"

Hitting Fidel's back, she knocked some life into him.

"Vera, do you understand? She's already turned the entirety of Beim against us. If the Trēs House is driven out, going against them is…"

Before the frustrated subordinates, and her depressed father, Vera pulled her gun from her holster, and discharged it at the ceiling.

Everyone looked at her.

"Two state-of-the-art ships. And the sailors will follow me. With that much, we'll be able to make it anywhere. As long as we have a port, the Trēs House can stand up once more. We don't have the time to cry or complain. Now get to your feet! Lets go make some earnings! The world isn't Beim alone."

Fidel looked at Vera, and nodded.

"That's… right. Right! Two ships, the seamen… if she's left that much to us, then I've no time for depression. I'll recover it all in no time. By Gina's tone, Beim's gotten to cleaning its closet. I doubt it'll end with just us driven out. So let's gather those sorts and move. I'll call out to the craftsmen as well. Get to securing funds at once! Beim shall regret the day they made an enemy of this Fidel Trēs!"

Fidel stood, while the subordinates sympathizing with him nodded, and moved on his orders. And Vera spoke.

"Also, I've an idea where we could move to. Let's rely on Lyle."

Hearing Lyle's name, Fidel made a blatantly reluctant face.

But…

“Hm… after using us as he pleased. It seems the Guild’s done something, but that damn gigolo won’t roll over so easily. Okay, how about we use and abuse him this time? Just you wait, whelp… I’ll wring you out to the marrow of your bones!”

Seeing Fidel’s motivation, Vera gave a bitter smile. Because up to now… everything had gone as Lyle anticipated…

Arrival

… A majority of adventurers called first rate, through their own Skills, and ones brought about by Magic Tools, it was only natural to be a master of a number of Skills.

There were those that only polished a single powerful Skill, But they were a specialized profession, and a special exception. The adventurers on the run. Four including the leader, they made sure to avoid the group lying in wait for them, as they headed for Beim.

Starting with the Leader, through their own, or Magic Tool Skills, they were all using some form of body enhancement. The four held their weapons, and had discarded any other unnecessary baggage. By their strengthened body, their speed was much greater than any average man's sprint.

They were all central members of the party. Leader, recon, front line, and magician; it was sheer luck they had all the bases covered. With good balance, if they pushed themselves, they'd be able to cut their way through a group to an extent. So thought the leader.

"Hurry. If we get passed this…"

The recon specialized adventurer running by his side clicked his tongue.

"… Che, Leader, we're being chased. They've got a perfect grasp of our position. One pursuer."

Informed that their pursuer had a precise grasp of their position, and a speed exceeding theirs, the leader was to make a decision on the spot.

"Are there any other on our trail?

“None. He’s moving individually. Perhaps he’s confident in his ability. It would be nice if he’s just a fool, but… whatever the case, he’s no ally.”

The front liner, a man with an iron lump of a sword reached his hand to its hilt.

“Oy, then before he catches up, shouldn’t we try to defeat him? It beats being attacked once we’re overtaken.”

He was a wild and rude man, but the words he said were right. It was hard to imagine their foe could exceed them in combat so easily. In the Labyrinth, for every monster several times the size of a human, there was a monster several times faster. The adventurers who fought against countless such foes.

It was only natural they were confident in their own abilities.

The magician man gave the frontliner’s opinion a push from the back.

“Rather than receiving a blast of magic from behind, waiting to intercept or defend is a safer option. We can put up countermeasures as we run, but that will bring out casualties.”

The leader spoke.

“… Everyone stop. Ready your weapons.”

Choosing to lie in wait, everyone stopped, and took their weapons in hand. The leader, his two prided swords… he took one in each hand, displaying a dual-wielding stance.

The recon specialist muttered a, ‘this is out of my expertise,’ as he confirmed their formation, took a crossbow off his back, and took a stance.

The front line man stood a little ahead of the leader, drawing his sword to lean it against his shoulder. The magician held up his staff, and started preparing magic.

Everyone secured their own space, and showed movements to watch for the one coming towards him.

The recon man informed everyone of the situation.

“He’s coming. On a knoll a little further in. Five, four three, two… he’s here!”

As if leaping from the knoll, seeing the single adventurer rush in, the recon specialist pulled the trigger of his crossbow. That expensive crossbow had a contraption to instantly load the next arrow.

Once the arrow was fired, the next one filled its slot. The magician shouted out.

“Lightning!”

A pale blue flash was fired at the enemy. It wasn’t focused on a single point, but a magic over a large area, swallowing up the swift enemy, and raising a dust cloud as it hit the ground. The four heard the explosion, and felt the tremor, but they didn’t let their guard down.

The recon man called out.

“Not yet! Here he comes!”

Firing another bolt, the four looked at the man who burst out of the smoke. Taking off his hood, before them was a blue-haired youth with blue eyes.

“So our foe is the general!”

The muscles of the large sword-toting front liner swelled, and with that sword in one hand, he leapt forward. The leader also stepped in to the front. But there, the unarmed youth grasped the blue gemstone at his chest with both his hands…

❼

Avoiding the fired magic, I leapt out of the fumes, and found the adventurers I’d been chasing out there, waiting for me.

Gripping the Jewel as if to wrap both hands around it, I heard the Fifth’s voice from within it.

『It's his first time showing off that one.』

After it let off a blue light, I was gripping a silver dagger in each hand. The Fourth's daggers had revived in silver light.

The reason I went out of my way to follow them alone… it was to fight first-rate adventurers. The ancestors approved that I had enough skill for it.

Generally, no matter how strong a human foe, if you surrounded them, it would work out one way or another. Even if they were strengthened through Skills, once surrounded, it was difficult to get out unscathed. So how would one get through an encirclement unharmed?

I had a number of Skills for the occasion.

Among them, the one the Fourth had left…

"Full Drive."

Whispering the Skill name, the surrounding movements grew slower. It was a Skill I experienced within the Jewel, but using it here, it carved away at my Mana.

I thought over how I wouldn't be able to use it for prolonged periods, as I avoided the attack of the man with the large sword who'd charged at me. It looked too showy, but even so, that swift blow lowered from above sucked in even the surrounding airspace with it, as it took a large bite out of the ground.

I moved to the side to avoid, but the sword instantly emerged from the ground, brushed towards me to send the dirt flying at me.

He was surely prepared for when he was avoided.

With simple enhancements, and other Skills to compensate for that, he was a considerably proficient vanguard, it seems. When I was moving so swiftly, it was amazing he was even able to react.

In the Labyrinth, he'd surely been a reliable adventurer who cut into the enemy on the front lines.

“One.”

But the two daggers I’d tossed in that timespace stuck into that adventurer’s head and chest. From the adventurer who didn’t seem to know what had happened, I moved my eyes to the adventurers positioned behind him.

Three remaining.

A dual-wielding man I presumed to be the leader, and behind him, an adventurer with a crossbow fired an arrow my way. But the most troublesome would be the magician.

When among allies, I doubt he would let out a spell with too large a scope, but even so, I had to crush him first.

I rushed forward, opened my hands, and manifested daggers in them. Twin daggers… that was the Fourth’s style, but it’s not as if he only carried around two of them.

A number of daggers appeared behind my back, drawing a circle as they each floated in space. If I willed them, they’d come to my hands.

As I passed by the presumed leader’s left, he swung the sword in his left hand. His reaction was fast, and I’m sure they were all adventurers above a set level.

Parrying it with a dagger, I went all the way to the magician, and pierced his chest, through the armor he was wearing.

“Two.”

The man with the crossbow to my side fired another arrow.

I slowly dodged the arrow that passed beside me, as I came at him with a dagger. When I got close enough, he turned his left hand to me.

It appeared he had a hidden weapon on his arm. I lopped his arm off contraption and all, piercing his heart through right after.

“Three.”

But at that point, the sluggish surrounding time began returning to normal.

The leader looked around at the surrounding situation in confusion. The man with the large sword had collapsed face-up, the magician and bowman's chest pierced, as they spat blood and collapsed on the ground, unsure of what had happened to them.

The leader with a sword in each hand looked at me.

"What… what did you do!?"

The daggers stabbed into the adventurers returned to the line of blades drawing a circle behind my back.

The Third emitted his voice from within the Jewel.

『If you pushed yourself, you probably could've kept it up to the end, but… well, I guess that's how it is. Lyle, you can't let your guard down just because it's come to one-on-one.』

"Yes."

Saying that, I gripped a dagger in each hand, and ran off towards the leader man. He likely didn't think he would be able to get away, so he ran at me in kind.

The form of him freely manipulating his blades, unlike the Fourth's style, where one side was kept on defense, was a style where both sides could switch back and forth between attack and guard. Closer to mine.

As I approached, a flash ran down his sword. Blocking the shockwave, I felt a numbness in my arms, so I tossed the daggers aside, and took some distance.

"Like I'd let you get away! As long as I can keep you close…!"

The enemy's Skill, or the effect of a magic tool. Lightning was running down his two blades, forcing me to concentrate on avoiding the shockwaves he fired.

If I blocked them I'd go numb, so I took a dagger in hand and tossed it. But…

"Is that all you've got!?"

"Oil?"

It was supposed to pierce into him. Using the Second's Skill… Select… I had definitely set my aim on his vitals. But without stabbing into anything, it was as if the dagger slid off. He had moved his body a little to the side to redirect it down his full-plate armor.

But when the dagger slid, I saw some liquid-like something under it.

Using his swords to send electric discharges around, the leader closed the distance to get me in his range. The grass growing from the ground was scorched, and a portion of lush grass caught flame.

I tossed the daggers in both my hands, and when he swung his sword to knock them aside, his head was left wide open.

From my back holster, I drew my gun, and after putting a pause on my other Skills, I fired it.

That Magic Tool of a gun fired a powerful round that barreled towards him.

But…

All six bullets stopped after sinking into the surface of his armor.

The output of the gun when used as a Magic Tool could even pierce monsters reknowned for their tough skin. No, it had enough force to blow them off. But it looked as if that force was sucked away.

"So you even have projectiles… but!"

The leader man stepped in, so I promptly leapt back. The lightning's output had gradually been increasing, and the swords began to shine.

Even if I dodged, the discharges scorched the surface of my clothes,

and let off a burnt scent.

“It’s your fault. That I’ve lost so many comrades and equipments… it’s you!”

It half looked as if he made a suicidal attack to slam his rage into me. As the surroundings baked, and the ground blackened, I threw one dagger after the next.

He repelled them, and slid them, and sent them all flying elsewhere.

“It’s futile! No matter how many times you repeat such attacks…”
“… Unfortunately, those daggers are a bit special.”

All of my daggers had stuck in somewhere around, and holding up my right hand, they rose, and turned their points towards the leader.

And as they flew at the leader one after another, he looked around at all the attacks coming at him, and discerned them.

But avoid them as he may, they rise again and attack. He was beginning to panic in the consecutive stream of attacks without an end in sight.

I prepared magic. I turned my right hand to my foe, bought time to activate it, and used my highest level spell.

“Flame Burst.”

With the leader man at the center, a large pillar of flame manifested, and drawing into the wind, it became a torrent of flame. The flames burst out, sending everything around them flying.

The daggers span around as a shield to protect me. I also used a shield of magic to endure the force, as a crater formed around me.

It had a high output, but it needed just as much preparations, so I needed to seal off my enemy’s movements.

At the center of the ground blown away, the leader man was on his knees. It looked as if he’d endured it, but his entire body was scalded. Half his face was in a horrid state.

“So you endured that?”

“… kuh.”

Unable to stand it anymore, he collapsed. There wasn’t any liquid on his surface. Whether it had burned away from the flames, or whether it was all an effect from a Skill. I hadn’t been able to discern it to the end.

But out of breath as he was, he spoke.

“Why. When you have so much power… why did the Guild target you? If they knew of you, they’d surely have chosen another means.”

It’s true, from an adventurer’s point of view, it would have been better if I’d been assassinated. In truth, that’s pretty much what it was. But from the Guild wasn’t able to assassinate me within Beim. My fame, and the circumstances wouldn’t permit it.

The leader before my eyes didn’t seem to understand that.

“After attacking someone’s comrades, are you giving an excuse once the tables turned?”

There, he burst into laughter.

“K-ku kuku, right. That’s right. The tables turned, that’s all. An end fitting of me. When they got around to calling me first-rate, I’d forgotten it. I was trash from the ground up… no matter how high I climb, I can’t change what makes me, huh… what will you do with our corpses?”

“We’ll present your heads. Setting an example.”

Hearing that, the adventurer laughed a little, ‘Then you should’ve kept me prettier. With burns this bad, that’s plain embarrassing,’ he even began to joke.

“Hey.”

His eyes had lost their light, and perhaps he couldn’t move anymore, as his voice had grown faint.

“What is it?”

“There’s no helping if you strip off our possessions. We lost after all.

Take the Magic Tools as well. I've done the same. But, this…"

He indicated a dagger mismatched for the hands of a first-rate adventurer.

"The man with the crossbow has one too. Please take his as well. It's garbage that won't net you any money, but it was precious to us… bury them. Anywhere is… fine… there are five in all."

He retired his breath.

I took the dagger in hand, and found there wasn't any trick or contraption to it. Drawing it from the hilt, I saw letters carved across. It was old, but well maintained, the letters spelling out the party's name.

The Third looked at it.

『A memory with his comrades from when he first started out, is what it looks like? Good grief, he requests quite some bothersome things from an enemy. What will you do, Lyle?』

I looked around.

The adventurers blown about by my magic. The man with the large sword was blackened quite badly, but while the adventurer who's arm I'd cut off had been blown off a distance, he wasn't burnt.

"… I'll collect them. Five in all? We'll just have to look through the belongings the Valkyries collected a bit. They won't make for any money regardless, and once we find them, I'll bury them together."

Milleia-san on my conduct.

『I don't think you have to, you know? Well, it's a problem of feelings, so just do what you want. Things are proceeding as anticipated, so a little whimsy won't be a problem.』

It seems my actions were needless. But if it wouldn't get in the way of anything, it should be fine. Take it the other way, and she was telling me not to do anything that got in the way of the plan.

The Seventh muttered reluctantly.

『Hmph, when they polished their technique so far, it's because they remained adventurers forever that it came to this. If they took a military post at some house, there was surely another road.』

I shared that opinion. But it's not like everyone could choose the 'clever' way of life. And I personally hadn't chosen a clever one.

It wouldn't be strange when I reached the same end as the adventurers collapsed around me.

❼

… Lyle ran off, so Ludmilla uninterestedly sat herself down on a simple chair, and issued orders around.

If there were mercenaries or adventurers that made it out, they would warmly welcome the East Branch, and take care of the others. At times, they'd purposely let them get away and head for Beim.

Lyle had left command to her, but when the course of action was so set in stone, it was time for the commanders to feel bored.

"He could've taken me along. I wanted to see Lyle's aptitude with these eyes of mine."

The one looking at the queen as she said that and sighed, was Erhart. Damien and Maksim were accompanying other units, but to keep Erhart close at hand, he was assisting Lyle.

He thought he should at least work off the worth of the Magic Tool he received. From the start, by his contract to accompany them, he had accepted a considerable amount of money. Magic Tool collection fell under Lyle's right, so it was something he felt a little awkward about.

In gaining wisdom as an adventurer, one came to have quite a grasp on the value of Magic Tools. And this one clearly had a value surpassing a thousand in gold. But Erhart wasn't ignorant enough to simply honestly rejoice having received it.

Using this as a reason, would he request something outrageous from me? He was thinking.

“No, he said he’d be fine alone, so won’t he be fine alone? Rather, is it really alright for a queen like you to be here?”

On Erhart’s question, the surrounding knights and soldiers gave small nods of agreement. There, Ludmilla drew her sword, and pointed its tip at the base of his throat.

“Oy, even like this, I’m a queen. Given a bit of time, I’ll lose that status, but I’m royalty here. Pay mind to your tone. If we were anywhere official, I’d have just cut through your neck.”

“Y-yes! My apologies!”

When Erhart apologized, the extended long-sword shrunk to its original length. And Ludmilla looked quite unamused as she returned it to its scabbard.

“That was a joke, you know.”

She muttered.

(Not a single word of that sounded like one. I can’t find any fun in the jokes of the guys in power!)

As Erhart felt irritated inside, a single knight approached.

“Ludmilla-sama, a group we presume to be allies are coming from the forest. It seems they are forces of Galleria and Rusworth, and they are headed our way. The representative of those countries are there as well, and it seems they’ve said that they have business here.”

Ludmilla stood, and walked off with the sword over her shoulder.

“Galleria and Rusworth. The two Maidens of War? I heard they’d be coming, and I’d quite like to meet them. I’m curious what women of valor they may be.”

Hearing that, Erhart thought those women of valor may end up getting along with one another. But one of his comrades grabbed his

arm, as if remembering something.

“What?”

“Oy, this is bad! If I recall correctly, the representatives of Galleria and Rusworth are…!”

Erhart suddenly recalled. It’s true there were rumors spreading of Lyle seducing both of them on the battlefield. Breaking into a cold sweat, Erhart…

“… Hey, do you think the cat-fight of national leaders will be scary?”

Erhart and his comrades were thinking of how they had to flee this site by all means…

Poison that Rends Beim

… At the point Lyle had run off from, Erhart was brimming with an urge to run away.

Around, the knights and soldiers of Cartaffs held up their weapons, while beyond the queen, who carried her longsword over her shoulder, two more women had come with their own forces.

The queen of Cartaffs was standing quite boldly. A woman with sea-blue hair, and a woman with silver hair… all three of them held violet eyes.

“I’ll say it as many times as I must. I will be taking Lyle. That man isn’t a caliber fit to be held at the side of a small country. My land of Cartaffs is the one worthy of him.”

Piercing the spear as tall as herself into the ground, the woman shakily letting off flames… Gracia shot back at those words.

“If you’ll let me have my say… I’ve already obtained approval. And Lyle is the holder of a considerable harem. I’ve obtained all its members permission before you. Be it of large lands or Cartaffs, a country taken over by a single Skillholder is worthy? You’d best keep those fantasies for your dreams”.

Her staff upright in the ground, standing as if to use both her hands to push it in, Elza’s atmosphere was one to freeze the surrounding air.

And in truth, around her alone, the breaths exhaled by troops were white.

“You come around later, and you’ll take him as groom? We had already proceeded talks with four nations. There’s ’no place left on

the stage for Cartaffs. If you'll cooperate quietly, then that's fine in itself."

The opinions of the two… the knights and soldiers holding weapons behind them had serious eyes.

Erhart was backed into a huddle with his comrades, shaking.

"What's this? Hey, someone tell me! I can't recognize this thing as a harem. The harem of my dreams definitely wasn't this dangerous sort of thing!"

Ludmilla looked down a bit, laughed, and spoke as she flipped her hair with her left hand.

"Small countries that amount to nothing lest you gather four of them, sure know how to sound high and mighty. I'll throw this out there, but just by those of your level gathering together, you've yet to reach the national power of Cartaffs. Triple your forces. Then I'll hear out your opinion."

It was true that Cartaffs boasted more than double the national power of the alliance. The country of the north possessed that much territory and resources.

"But as the princess of a foreign land, I'll recognize you as Lyle's mistress."

Erhart timidly, timidly remarked.

"Eh? That guy already had more than ten women, right? They're all to be mistresses?"

Even if you didn't count the Valkyries, Erhart knew Lyle's had at least that many women. By rumor, there were talks of Zayin's Holy Maiden and former Holy Maiden as well.

Hearing that, Ludmilla and the others turned their eyes to Erhart.

"And what of it? Taking on an extra mere ten holds no problem to me. I have the national power to spare. If they fulfill their roles, I'll recognize them. Of course, number one will be me."

To Ludmilla's overflowing confidence, Gracia's flames burned higher, and Elza's chill grew colder.

Within all that, Erhart saw it.

(That woman's laughing behind this scene of carnage!)

At the end his eyes, leaning her body against the horse she rode, Miranda was delightedly looking upon the dispute of the three.

And to Erhart, it was as if he could hear her voice.

(Now crush each other.)

Her expression was one to say it.

Gracia lifted her spear from the ground, and yelled.

"Don't speak so highly, oh queen of Cartaffs! I'll crush you here! You're an enemy as well!"

Her sentiment was emphasized on the 'as well' part.

"It's a good opportunity. Let's put Lyle's Harem in order as we stand. And you're first, Ludmillaa!!"

Gripping her staff, and forming a blade of ice, Elza took a stance. The soldiers behind her wrung out their voices, and gripped their weapons, looking as if they'd attack at any moment.

Before the two of them, Ludmilla smiled… but that instantly turned to an expression of scorn.

"… How unfortunate. And I was even compromising here. Then I'll see out your ability."

As she pulled her longsword, and its red blade let off a dubious light, Erhart frantically looked around to try and do something. And he spied Lyle in the distance, looking on the scene from afar.

"Ah, Oy! Come back! Hurry and…"

… And do something, before he could hear those words from Erhart, Lyle turned the other way, and ran off.

Lyle had ran away. And seeing his back, Miranda urged on her horse to chase him.

Until Miranda could catch him and bring him back, there were considerable casualties to the surroundings…

❼

When everything was over, I led the three country representatives into Beim, as I smeared some medicine over my face.

Perhaps it looked like we were returning from a hard-fought war, as on Beim's main street, the rubbernecks stood on both sides looking at the three nationalities of knights as they made sure not to block our paths.

It wasn't rare for a knight brigade to enter Beim, and it was considered a sort of exhibition.

As Eva had already entered Beim to spread rumors, we were welcomed by the city quite warmly.

By the residents, that was. If it were for the merchants and guild executives, that would be a different story.

Within the legion close to two thousand, there were some of the adventurer parties who were supposed to have attacked us as well.

With all the cheers, the adventurers stepped back, and were welcomed as the heroes who saved the Queen of Cartaffs.

Inside the Jewel, the Seventh put a cold opinion to mouth.

『They sure are care-free. If they knew of what we… no, what Lyle was going to do, there's no way they'd be able to laugh.』

In Beim, I had already knew adventurers had returned to their various branches. It was around the time where the Guilds would be in a scramble to collect information. I had chosen that time at my own discretion to return.

The Third spoke as if to soothe the Seventh.

『Isn't it fine? There's no doubt it's the triumphant return of a hero. A hero for whom, though, is a separate issue. Now them, it would be nice if the poison we set in Beim was spreading nicely.』

What I sent in were the favorably-treated East Branch adventurers, and the fact the Guild had given us information…

That wasn't all. The fact the adventurers who were sent to attack us were now accompanying us was surely something they couldn't understand.

The Fifth thought over what was to come, as he put it to mouth.

『With this, we've fulfilled our minimum goal. After that, it's on to confirm the seeds we sowed are budding. By our estimate, there's a high probability they'll take a strong action in regards to Lyle. That's why we riled them up after all.』

To put on airs, I road at the lead on horseback, the Guild's headquarters coming into sight.

"… Once the Beim takes some strong countermeasure, it's the end. East Branch, Trēs House… it also depends on how they move, but with this, Beim will split."

The city called Beim was a giant lump of authority. It held an authority more troublesome than a single country, and it had grown into a land that turned its surroundings into a sea of blood to syphon off the gold. Its system completed over the ages, changing it from the inside would be difficult, and I didn't have the time.

I wanted the support of Beim. In order to fight Celes, I definitely wanted it.

But I couldn't let myself be supported condition-lessly. If Beim did come to support me without conditions, then even if I beat Celes, a large problem would remain on the continent.

Beim would use me to become an even bigger, and even more troublesome city. Even if I defeated Celes, and laid hands on the country, I wouldn't be able to cut off Beim after they aided me. If I

did, they would make me their next enemy.

So…

“… I’ll have the city of merchants and mercs sink into their own sea of blood once.”

… For my sake, I’d have them sin to hell. Even if there were irrelevant virtuous people in it, for the future… for me.

❼

… Guild Headquarters.

The gathered executives had rough voices without their usual composure.

There were complaints coming from the merchants too. That they didn’t slay Lyle was a problem, but what the merchants emphasized was Cartaffs’ protest.

That the adventurers sent by the Guild didn’t work, and Lyle who’d came afterwards completed the request was a problem. But their biggest failure was trying to run away. It raised the issue of a large injury to Beim’s credibility.

At the same time, there was the issue of Beim’s East Branch suffering so little casualty. The mercenary brigade sent by the South Branch was practically annihilated, One first rate party the West Branch sent was wiped out, while the other was assisting Lyle.

Barely any of the ones the North Branch sent had returned. According to what the ones who’d returned had said, Lyle had overlooked only the East Branch adventurers, did he not?

Hearing that, they couldn’t stay silent.

“You turned coat! You betrayed the other branches, and leaked information! How will you take responsibility for that!?”

The South Branch’s executive slammed his fist on the table, and glared at the East Branch executive. Before his bloodshot eyes,

Tahnia determined that no matter what was said, it wouldn't get through. Her superior executive was the same.

"… We didn't betray. We've identified the one who sold the info. It was one of our receptionists. I'm sure she had some sort of circumstance, but it isn't something to be forgiven."

The North Branch's executive's stare was also stiff.

"It's a protest straight from the Queen of Cartaffs. That's a vital port to the merchants. And we've even made an enemy of Galleria and Rusworth, where we're to gain the rights to construct a port… do you plan to push this time's responsibility onto a single receptionist?"

The West Branch's expression was pale and senseless. The Labyrinth managed by Beim had a depth exceeding a hundred floor. To that extent, its management demanded considerably delicate interaction.

Adventurers capable of exceeding the sixtieth floor were extremely essential existences. They weren't something that could be replenished so easily once lost.

The surviving party held suspicious the Guild had sold them out. And that the Guild had told Lyle they were going to attack, was evidence enough.

And of all things, they were quite wickedly broadcasting that fact all over town. If the West Branch cut off a first class adventurer party, it would raise even more suspicions.

It was difficult to wipe them out, but in truth, one such party had already disappeared.

Rumors spread, and the adventurers thought they had been dragged into a Beim factional war. And because that wasn't mistaken, it was worst all the more. Lyle truly was vicious towards the Guild.

"Nonsense… that's nonsense! Do you understand what trials the West Branch will face because of your betrayal!? What's that receptionist's name!? Give me a name!"

Tahnia's expression didn't crumble as she clenched her fist. The one who sold the info was Marianne. She had obtained Guild documents, and they investigated it well enough to be sure she handed them to Lyle.

The East Branch's executive let out a sigh.

"Marianne of the private receptionist desks."

The South Branch executive turned an eye to the Sweeper behind him. That Sweeper, who was also a sort of guard, lowered his head, and left the room. The guards of the other branches were the same.

The East Branch executive spoke.

"Tahnia, you should be off too. I'm fine here alone… if you're the one to get to her, make it painless."

Tahnia lowered her head.

"… Yes."

Tahnia left the room, moving alongside the other sweepers to clean up Marianne…

❼

Before I could hear the explanation of this matter from Guild headquarters, I went to the Trēs House's mansion. Aria came along as a sort of guard.

"The moods somewhat strange here."

It was as she said.

The employees were busily moving around. Getting luggage in order, the subordinates were taking a strange sense of distance from one another, and it felt as if they were feuding within the same mansion.

I waited in a waiting room, and without calling me to the parlor, Vera and Fidel-san came in.

Fidel-san had removed his overcoat, and rolled up his sleeves. He didn't have his usual refreshing air, but the sharp glint in his eyes was even greater than before.

From the Jewel came a delighted voice. It was Milleia.

『Oh? Is he the type that exhibits his best when cornered?』

When I thought of how we were the ones who cornered him, I couldn't find it in me to laugh. Vera and Fidel sat on the sofa, Fidel-san being the first to break the ice.

"… It seems Beim decided to cut you off. And while it looks like you've returned safely, there will be no change in that verdict. At best, an exile from the city. And we who supported you have been dragged in as well. Do you have any excuses?"

He was saying it was my fault, but in most cases my position would be one where that would be a false charge. In this specific case, I had aimed for it and brought it about, so I had nothing to return.

"I have no words to return. It is just as you say."

Fidel-san's eyebrow twitched.

"I see. Then I'll have you work back our support in kind. Our expulsion from Beim will be set in stone next merchant conference. You seduced the Queen of Cartaffs, did you? Have her allow our use of her port. And prepare a point for us to set up base. Anywhere is fine. Rusworth, or Galleria, or anywhere else."

If a stranger heard it, they'd be irrational requests. But I had thought over them. No, I had intended to do at least that much.

"Understood. In regards to the base, my current stronghold has a suitable plot of land. I'll prepare it there. Ah, of course, I'll hire workers, and get this and that in order. I'll also get permission for the port's use."

Fidel-san's eyebrows were twitching up and down. Since I had taken all of his conditions, on the contrary, he was suspicious.

And when I accepted all his requests, he was making an expression

as if it wasn't enough.

Fidel-san closed his mouth, and Vera's turn came. But her expression wasn't the best.

"… Lyle, I can't give you any satisfactory support from here on. I understand my own worth. So if you're going to cut me off, then I'd like your decision soon. I don't want to be a burden."

All she could do ended here. Saying that, Vera tried to back out.

There, Milleia-san's atmosphere made me feel she was nodding as she spoke.

『She does understand her value. And it's a good thing she knows when to opt out. But that's no good. We'll be taking you along to the end. Lyle, make a cool decision. If you throw away a woman you've gotten hands on to rise higher… I'll curse you.』

Rather than the ancestors cursing me, Milleia-san cursing me was several times worse. It felt like that person's curse really would work. It felt like she would do any and all forms of harassment.

I sat deeply into the sofa, and looked at Vera.

"I see. Then I'll take all you have left, and bring an end to it."

Vera smiled. But Fidel-san's face was bright red, and he was making a fist.

"Yes, that's a load off my mind."

I stood, approached, Vera, grabbed her arm, and stood her to her feet. I put both my hands around her back, and embraced her, to rest my chin on her shoulder.

Aria's face went red.

"… So he really has grown in this sort of thing."

Or so she said, as she averted her eyes. Fidel-san made a conflicted expression.

"I said I'd take everything. You're mine. You don't need to have

anything, just stay by my side. I'll always accept you"

"… Lyle."

Vera wrapped her arms around my back as well.

Fidel-san spoke in an expression I couldn't tell was happy of irritated.

"Dammit, should I rejoice at how you won't throw my daughter away after using her, or feel embarrassed as a parent that I have to overlook this damn gigolo taking her… why is it, when he isn't like this, it's like he's not the damn gigolo I know."

There, the Third seemed intrigued.

『… Doesn't it feel like Fidel-kun was waiting for you to rile him up? This, I'm sure he was lonely because Lyle didn't come to contest or rile him.』

There, Milleia-san had some fun.

『Quite right! Now, Lyle… rile Fidel-kun up. I'm sure he'll be delighted. I'll grade how well you've gotten at adding fuel to the flames!』

The Fifth, quietly.

『… You guys really have some nice personalities there.』

I thought a little, before whispering into Vera's ear. She had been on the verge of tears, but upon hearing that, she nodded.

And touching a hand to her stomach, she looked at her father Fidel.

I turned a smile to him.

"Well, quite a bit happened, but let's get along from now on, father-in-law."

When I said that as I wrapped a hand around Vera's waist, Vera touched both hands to her stomach, and looked down.

Having seen that, Aria took a step back and froze.

"L-Lyle, you couldn't have!"

Fidel-san fell from the sofa, and struck the floor.

“So you’ll even take my Vera from me, you damn gigolo! Daaaammittt!! As I thought, you’re my enemy!! To the end of the end, I’ll drop you to the bottom of the sea!”

For some reason, Fidel-san writhing on the floor looked just a little happy, but I’d like to think the light was playing a trick on my eyes.

When I thought I had succeeded, some cold voices came from the Jewel. The Third let out a sigh.

『Lyle… that riling was no good. A complete failure.』

The Fifth seemed to sense something.

『It was interesting. That Fidel was really shining his best. But no, go die.』

The Seventh seemed worried for me.

『… Lyle, that sort of riling will cut down your life-span.』

Milleia-san rejected it as well.

『Just riling isn’t enough. I can’t accept anything that will waste you away. You’ve still a long way to go.』

I don’t really get what she was trying to say. To me, the Third spoke.

『Lyle, this time, you get a zero. I’m sure this will bring you some pain to come, so resolve yourself. Well, those sorts of experiences are important as well, and it’ll be fun, so we’re watching over you.』

My first zero in a while.

And with a bit of a red face, Vera spoke as if recalling something.

“Oh right, Lyle.”

“Hmm?”

“It seems the Guild is searching for the traitor, but are they related to you? If you aren’t quick, they may send a Sweeper or something.”

It seems my work in Beim had yet to end.

Broken Heart

After requesting Fidel to negotiate at the merchant conference, I moved through Beim alongside Aria.

She looked like she wanted to say something, but for now, she held it in.

Touching my right hand to my ear, I used Skills to search around the area.

The Skills… Dimension and Real Spec… they gave me info of the people moving around the giant metropolis of Beim.

To process the intense load of information, I relied on Monica staying at the inn.

Monica, who moved by my energy, was generally connected to me through a line.

It was like I was constantly using Connection with her.

As I swiftly walked alongside Aria, I whispered.

“Monica, how is it?

After a little while, a response came. It meant Monica had computed out the designated individual.

『Time-wise, she should be returning home from the Guild. And right on time, the target is leaving the East Branch. Enemies showing strange movements around her… number eight. They’re movements are in accordance with our information, and I therefore conclude them to be Sweepers.』

So eight existences showing different movements.

While skillfully blending in with the crowds, it seems they were aiming for the target Marianne-san's life.

Aria spoke beside me.

"Marianne-san will be alright, right? Not sure I should say it after we used her, but if she's killed, it'll be harder to sleep at night. That person's…"

I didn't need to be told that. While a receptionist, she was a person who'd push herself to save the adventurers on the very bottom.

In the past, the one she liked was an adventurer, and he lost his life, or so I heard. Perhaps that had become a trauma, as when we took Erhart's party hostage, she assisted us.

"I know. I had Monica call out to our other comrades as well. Relief will come at once. We just need to buy time for that."

I led Aria into a shortcut to Marianne-san's location… a back alley. Unlike the main road, there were few passersby.

"Aria."

"What? …!!"

I drove her against the wall, and kissed her. Pushing my hands to the wall around her, I made it so she couldn't run, and stuck in the tongue.

For the surprisingly innocent Aria, it took quite some time to explain these circumstances. Without such time to spare, I forced a kiss, and parted my mouth.

My Skill… Connection… formed a line between us.

Aria wiped her mouth as she spoke.

"… Say something before you do it."

"There's no time. I'm using the Skill, but don't peer in too deeply. It's hard for even Novem and Miranda. Make sure you just pick out the minimum necessary information you can. We're going."

The Jewel began letting off a faint Light.

Activating the Fourth's Skill… Speed… we raced down the alley. I felt it was raising our speed more than it had been before, but I wasn't sure if that was due to my Growth, or because I had gotten more Skillful at using it.

But without the time to think over that, I headed for Marianne-san's location.

On the map floating within my head, her movements had undergone a change.

It seems Aria had noticed it as well.

"Why is she heading for an unpopular spot of her own accord? That's definitely a tad strange."

I spoke to Aria.

"They probably looked into it beforehand. It's easy to block off a road, right? Just sticking up a danger poster can easily lead someone on."

I ran and hurried alongside her. There, from a shop in the alley, an adventurer with a black sword over his back emerged with his comrades.

❼

… Miranda ran across a roof of Beim.

Eva was accompanying as well, but the one running at the lead was Monica.

It was the time for Beim to be dyed in the twilight, and a period where it would start getting darker all at once.

Lyle had informed them of Marianne's crisis, and to come to her rescue, they had left Valkyries to guard Clara and Shannon at the inn, and rushed out.

As she ran across the roof, Eva.

“We’re definitely getting a complaint about this later!”

The roof was in horrid condition, and as the three ran across it, a portion fell through. Miranda leapt across the gap to the next building as she spoke to Eva.

“We didn’t see anything. And it was going to collapse eventually.”

Eva also jumped the gap, and chased Monica.

Running at the Lead, Monica made a sudden change of direction.

“The target isn’t passing through the expected point. I’ll predict her new route. Please follow close.”

While she was wearing a frilly maid uniform that looked hard to move in, Monica’s movements were extremely nimble. Having experienced a number of Growths, Miranda and Eva had to put all their might to following her.

What’s more, it didn’t seem she was giving it her all.

To take the girls to the scene, she was likely regulating her speed.

“She changed her path? You sure it wasn’t changed for her?”

“That may be the case. Beim is practically the backyard of those Sweepers.”

Miranda thought a troublesome existence had begun to move.

(The adventurer killers, eh? It’s quite certain they’ll be Skillholders. Good grief, what do they mean to accomplish by killing a receptionist colleague?)

Disposing of intolerable adventurers was their role, and Miranda had heard rumor that they were usually working normally within the Guild.

It could be the case a target adventurer would happen upon a face they had become acquainted with, and they couldn’t fight back too strongly against a receptionist. It was thought they made use of that mentality, and now that they’d made a move, Miranda thought it was

the perfect opportunity to confirm it.

Eva sounded worried.

“We’ll make it, won’t we? And even if we do, With Lyle, Aria and us, we have five. That isn’t enough to have our foes retreat, is it?”

The three leapt onto a slightly higher building, and from there, onto a lower one.

Monica spoke.

“The way things are going, the Chicken Dickwad wil be the first one on the scene. If they did have the mind to run, then that’s the point they’d do it. Well, if we fought, I can’t think we’d lose.”

Dealing with everything apart from Lyle with relative level-headedness, Monica disinterestedly answered Eva’s questions…

7

… Marianne had found a board propped up, notifying her of a closed road on her usual path home, so she took a bit of a detour.

The sign politely outlined which roads to take to get around construction, even having an orderly map written on it. Having never used those streets since she was born in Beim, she felt it a bit of a curiousity.

Her work at the guild ended, so she changed her clothes in the dressing room, and left through the Guild’s back door as she always did.

There were times when she’d be accompanied on her way, but this time, the other girls had been called out by her superior, so she left before them.

She carried a bag, and tilted her head as she passed through the dim streets.

“Did I take a wrong turn? But there weren’t any forks on the way here.”

She was sure she had walked as the map had detailed, but she was at a dead end. A place where the narrow gaps between the lines of buildings were the only way ahead.

But for an end of a road, it was strangely wide.

Turning to retrace her steps, she found a white-masked black-clothed woman standing behind her.

Marianne took a step back from surprise, and looked up. The design differed a bit, but a black-clothed figure group wearing uniform white masks were peering in from the tops of the buildings.

Marianne was a receptionist of the Guild.

She had turned ear to a number of rumors, and she had heard the rumors of the Sweepers. As a deterrent to adventurers, mixing their rumors with a slab of truth and leaking them was the way of the Guild.

And seeing their outfits, Marianne understood they were sweepers. She dropped her bag, and hung her head.

"… I don't think we've met, or so I'd like to say."

With Erhart taken hostage, Marianne had handed Lyle's party the info on the adventurer who would be attacking them. That was a clear act of betrayal against the Guild. She did it knowing full well.

Perhaps she wouldn't be found out, it's not like she had harbored such naïve thoughts. And it seems her foe was a proficient one.

Marianne looked at the Sweeper before her eyes. From the eye-holes of the white mask, a pair of red eyes looked back. Marianne instantly understood who she was.

With that body build, and atmosphere, and those red eyes.

"… Right, it was you. I always had that feeling. There were plenty of things that couldn't be explained away just by you being our boss's favorite."

The white-masked Sweeper took a knife in hand, and let out her

voice. It was definitely Tahnia… Tanya's voice, Marianne thought. As she was wearing a mask, she heard a different voice than usual, but she knew it was still Tanya's.

"It's unfortunate, Marianne. I didn't hate you at all. But a betrayal against the Guild… this matter cannot be overlooked."

The other Sweepers around were probably from the other branches. They were watching to make sure Tahnia properly did her job.

"… Was that signboard your work?"

Thinking of how the Sweepers had drafted up that signboard to lure her here, Marianne found it a little amusing. Seeing Marianne smiling a little, Tahnia nodded.

"It will be that you were raped here. We've already prepared a culprit. One adventurer violent by nature will be a scapegoat."

As if to embrace herself, Marianne grasped her own arms, and managed to keep her shaking body on her feet.

"… I see. Then be quick with it. End it before I show an embarrassing side from fear."

Running away from the Sweepers was impossible for her. So she closed her eyes, and waited for the moment of Tahnia's blade ending her life.

But…

"What are you doing!?"

A rough voice called out, and when she opened her eyes, she saw the form of Erhart cutting at the Sweeper. Behind him, his comrades came with weapons in hand, passing by Erhart and Tahnia to surround Marianne. At the backs of the adventurers she'd once looked after, Marianne cried out.

"What are you doing!? Run away! These people are…!

There, Erhart was kicked to the side, but he caught Tahnia's next attack with his large black sword, and relied on brute force to send

her into the air.

Tahnia agilely spun, and touched her feet to the wall. And as if that wall were the ground, she stood up on it. On that scene of her ignoring the laws of gravity, Erhart seemed perplexed. But he spoke to Marianne.

“I know. They’re Sweepers, right? And what of it? We haven’t given you our thanks yet.”

Marianne, hearing those words, imagined that Lyle had surely told him something.

“… So you heard? But even so, you’re mistaken. There’s no way a normal adventurer could oppose the Guild and win.”

And it was at the moment Tahnia started to move.

Rushing it at an amazing speed, a red-haired woman held up her spear, and thrust at the empty wall behind Marianne.

It was Aria. Aria leapt forward, and stuck her spear through that empty space. There, in what was nothing, one black-garbed man appeared, scattering blood into his surroundings.

In his hand was a knife, and he had been on the verge of killing Marianne.

In that space surrounded by buildings, an individual leisurely walked in. He was a youth of blue hair, the talk of Beim… he was Lyle…

❼

About Marianne-san’s rescue, it looks like we made it in time.

An invisible enemy detected through the Second’s Skill was sewed into the wall by Aria’s spear. Pulling a sword from her hip, Aria remained wary of the Sweepers standing sideways on the wall.

I had a guess as to who it was.

“Tanya-san, that’s quite the dangerous attire you’re wearing there.

But a Skill to stand on walls? That looks surprisingly convenient.”

There, without giving a reply, Tanya-san leaned down on the wall to cut at me. But a Sweeper fell down from above.

While those around were surprised, me and Aria were not.

“How about you worry more about why they didn’t haven’t come down yet?”

Battle had started above, and I could hear the clatter of breaking roofs alongside the sound of strife.

The fallen Sweeper had an arrow stuck through his head. Eva had taken him out. At times, the buildings gave a terrible sway, and scattered loads of sand and dust, with fragments falling around.

Because Monica was lowering her hammer.

Seeing the situation, Tanya-san began to retreat. She ran straight across the wall, and ran right away. Within that, I gave an order to Monica.

“Monica, overlook the Sweeper who just ran away. She’s of the East Branch. That will make them twice as sure.”

There, continuing her battle, Monica replied.

『Understood. By the way, I’ve kinda been stabbed by a poisoned knife here, but won’t you ask if I’m alright?』

“… Poison doesn’t even work on you.”

『Hmm, you’re getting to understand how it works. Well, whether you worry or retort, whatever you do, I’ll be delighted.』

I understood that what worked best on that triumphant attitude of hers was ignoring her. Above, Miranda captured two in her sticky threads, before using her wire to take their heads.

They all possessed troublesome Skills, it seems, but while Monica had taken the enemy’s attacks, Miranda and Eva reduced their numbers, apparently.

Aria let out a sigh.

“Lyle, to an outsider, it would look like you’re just talking to yourself.”

My mind had been taken by the situation upstairs, and looked around, I gave a bitter smile. Looked at from the side, I was definitely talking to myself.

Giving a reason for Erhart’s dubious expression.

Marianne-san sat on the spot.

“… I’m the worst. Dragging them all into it.”

She glared at me. I could understand why. When she wanted to protect Erhart’s party, the conclusion speaks that I dragged them in past the point of no return.

Erhart sheathed away his black sword, and spoke to Marianne.

“That’s wrong. I said it. That I wanted to save you. I… no, we… haven’t said thank you yet. We didn’t know the sorts of dangerous things you were doing to save us. So…”

With those words, everyone began thanking her, but Marianne-san shook her head to the side.

“… I don’t need your thanks. I only did it out of self-satisfaction. So you were all fine as you were.”

Sitting, and cradling her knees. I looked up at the sky. I couldn’t hear any sounds anymore, so it seems the battle was over.

And on the spot, Erhart spoke.

“Marianne-san, I… loved you. You thoughtfully and carefully taught so much to idiots like us. You encouraged us. So I…”

Marianne-san stood, and directed a smile to Erhart. But it was a little sorrowful, and she shook her head once more.

“Thank you. I’m glad you all grew up so splendidly. But. I’ve already decided. I won’t let myself love an adventurer. So you should find someone new.”

Perhaps her conclusion from loving an adventurer and losing him was that she couldn't love an adventurer at all.

His comrades moved to tears, Erhart wept as he laughed.

"… I see. Then there's no helping it. There's no helping it, right!"

Seeing the scene from within the Jewel, Milleia-san sounded delighted.

『Oh my, they sure are living out their youth there. A pure relationship you won't get from Lyle.』

The main reason I've become like this is due to the ancestors in the Jewel… and it's mainly your fault, I thought, as I rolled the Jewel with my fingertip.

As Aria came to my side, I nodded and spoke.

"Let's collect the Sweeper masks. We can use them to call out the Guild."

Aria looked at me and sighed.

"You really are… I'm starting to feel sorry for the Guild that made an enemy out of you."

As Erhart was experiencing youth, we got our hands on a card to challenge the Guild to some dark and muddy negotiations.

Who was Abandoned Again?

After rescuing Marianne-san, and witnessing the moment Erhart's love came to a close, I headed for the inn.

There's no way we would could just return Marianne-san to her house, so we led her to the inn, and would be keeping her close for a while to ensure her safety.

Leaving her guards, I returned to my own room I'd rented, took the white mask in hand, and gazed at it. It was a Sweeper mask, and it seems they had different characteristics by branch.

Preparing a drink for me in the room, Monica looked at the mask, and offered a line.

"They've got sense. For it to be white as snow."

I chastised it.

"They just had to hide their faces and intimidate their enemies, right? If you saw this mask in the dark, anyone would feel fear. More importantly are you alright? What with the poison and all?"

The poisoned knife of an attacking sweeper.

Having taken it, Monica was composed. Her body and the tears on her clothes had already returned to normal, and once more I experienced first-hand she was an existence outside the norm. Since I only ever saw that unfortunate side of hers on a daily basis, I sometimes felt I would forget it, but Monica was an automaton.

"… It's come. The Chicken Dickwad's dere has finally come. Acting

like you didn't care at the start, when we're alone, you show your anxiety. Ah, what a wonderful tsundere! This Monica is so happy it feels she's going to send annotated footage to all those other scraps to brag about my triumph."

She was the usual Monica, so I felt relieved.

"Oh, I see. So what sort of poison did he use?"

Pouring tea into a cup, Monica brought it over to me. After I took it and put it to my mouth, Monica began explaining the poison.

"It's a quick-acting one that doesn't leave any residue in the body, so it would be difficult to discover. On top of that, it would be difficult to identify the cause of death. I'm surprised they were able to produce something like that."

In regards to the poison, Monica praised the Sweeper.

"So would it be dangerous if it were Miranda and Eva alone?"

"I won't say they'd lose. But a majority would get away. They would only have been able to take out one… two at most. And there's a possibility one of the girls would have died."

Even having repeated so many Growths in a short period of time, there was a high probability casualties would come out. As expected, the Sweepers were a dangerous existence.

That they were aiming for Marianne-san without paying too much mind to us was a saving grace. Because we'd used that opportunity to launch a surprise attack, we were able to achieve a complete victory.

"If they had been serious and sent Sweepers from the start, it would have been dangerous. Why didn't they send them to start with?"

If they wanted to reliably take me out, I got the feeling that way held the higher probability. If it were assassination and taking care of the body, the Sweepers should be more used to it than adventurers.

The one to answer the question was the Seventh.

『Lyle, it's not certain the other party has many talents capable of becoming sweepers. It isn't just ability, there's also a need to investigate if they can make use of that individual's personality and such. If you're just strong, you wouldn't be chosen as one. Understand? You've just crushed seven of the enemy's hard-to-get pieces.』

On top of the small table, six white masks were stacked. One was in my hands, and of the eight attackers, only one had gotten away.

I never thought Tanya-san was a sweeper, but come to think of it, I get the feeling she was the only one whose position in the guild waved back and forth.

In hindsight, that would explain a lot.

Monica asked me.

"Chicken dickhead, in tomorrow's merchant conference, what did you request from Fidel?"

I looked at her face.

"To have them recognize our stronghold as their next area of operations. I had him carry out the negotiations for that. Well, if he says he wants to head to that empty land, I'm sure they'd permit it. Ludmilla-san is also supporting that direction. Elza-san and Gracia-san are developing their ports on schedule… ah, right. While I'm at it. I should have the Guild dispatch some personnel. With the management of the Labyrinth there, and such, we'll need the Guild's knowhow from here on."

I decided to take the Guild knowhow from Beim as well.

❼

The next day.

Heading to Guild Headquarters, I spotted Fidel-san walking with Ludmilla-san.

Surrounded by knights, Ludmilla-san was in good humor.

Fidel-san alone made a complicated expression as he looked at me. After that, I had pleaded for Vera to explain it was a joke. And yet, he didn't look to happy about that.

As I found myself a little unable to understand Fidel-san, the Seventh spoke.

『… I'm sure he wanted to see his grandson. Lyle, you have to clean up your own problems. Vera told Fidel it was a joke, but Aria doesn't know that yet. You've mistaken your choices.』

Milleia-san's tone was more serious than usual.

『Lyle, you'll be paying the compensation for your failure. Learn that if you don't extinguish the flame while it's small, it will be hell to take care of once it blazes up… but I do want to see the blaze as well.』

That last part was the usual Milleia-san.

Ludmilla-san approached me.

"Lyle, I did as you said. So you'll pay up my compensation for that, won't you?"

With those eyes that saw me as a carnivorous beast saw its prey, Ludmilla-san sought out her compensation.

"Aha, ahahaha… compensation, is it? Hey, I saved you from Larc, didn't I?"

Seeing my exchange with Ludmilla-san, Fidel-san muttered.

"As I thought, you're an enemy. Laying hands on women besides Vera…"

As the father of his daughter, I'm sure he had much to think in regards to me. But he also had his merchant face in stock, so…

"I've proceeded that matter as you requested. In the talk of Guild executives that's to come, the request for Labyrinth Subjugation will be abolished, and alongside that, the flow will go towards establishing another Guild branch of Beim. With that, I've fulfilled my

promise.”

For the Labyrinth south of Beim, it does seem they’re just going to put it under Beim management. It was relatively easy to advance through, and it was evaluated highly as monsters you couldn’t find in Beim’s Labyrinth came out.

“But the revocation of your party’s rights as adventurers has been decided. You’re considerably hated by a portion of the merchants and Guild executives. Thinking of their future relations with Bahnseim, your banishment from Beim is certain.”

Hearing that talk, I nodded.

The Fifth let his voice from the Jewel.

『Meaning they’ll be joining hands with Celes. Now then, how will things go from here… will they become her pawns, or will they attack Bahnseim. Whatever the case, Beim is going to be destroyed once.』

Ludmilla-san looked at me with intrigue.

“You’re quite unperturbed. As if you knew it was coming. Of course, it would be troubling if you stayed with your adventurer status forever. How about it? Want to come to Cartaffs and take the throne?”

I gave a bitter smile, as I spoke to her.

“I’ll stop by in the near future. Because I have business there as well.”

And I headed towards the conference room at Guild headquarters I’d been called out to.

❼

In that conference room with the seats lined with Guild executives, I swung around a fervent speech.

“I risked my life and fought at Fort Redant! And not that alone, to

this point, I've made massive contributions to the Guild! What is the meaning of this exile!? And in that matter with Cartaffs, while I was away, my comrades were attacked, were they not? Was that also the Guild's doing!?"

The seated Guild executives looked at my face in resentment. It's true I worked hard for the sake of Beim.

But to them, I was the big bad who created such an unappealing situation, and when Marianne-san was attacked, their valuable Sweepers were defeated by me.

Their talk with the merchants was already over, so I'm sure my verdict was already set in stone. Right, the guild executives had no right to decide.

And I decided to use that fact well, to appeal just how hard I worked.

Well, to put it simply…

『You'll cut off the hero who risked his life for you? What's more, you attacked and tried to erase him, didn't you? I haven't forgotten, you know. I'll definitely remember this! … that sort of thing.』

… The Third gave a truly delightful explanation. It wasn't just the executives. There were guild personnel here to make records, and there were a considerable number of those concerned.

The South Branch head's glare on me seemed as if it could kill. The West Branch's executive's expression was pale as he hung his head.

The North Branch's executive was looking at the East Branch's head and Tanya-san.

The staff led around by the other executives were likely sweepers. But I couldn't help but feel they fell short when compared to Tanya-san.

The East Branch executive spoke to me.

"… I'm sure it happened however you imagine it did."

Giving a statement that could be taken however anyone wanted, the East Branch executive looked at me with a serious expression.

From the guild, my… all of my party's adventurer rights were revoked, and the Labyrinth Subjugation we were tasked with was annulled.

They planned to use that Labyrinth here on, so I was taken off of clearing it.

And I was to take a forceful departure from Beim.

"I cannot accept it. Won't you at least explain your reasons? Oh, right… the truth is, it's about what happened yesterday, but an acquaintance was being attacked, so I saved her, you see. A receptionist who looked after me. And while one of the attackers got away, they were wearing quite the characteristic mask."

There, I took out the seven white masks. When I placed them on the table before me, I felt malice fill the room. It was from the Sweepers behind the executives.

The South Branch executive stood.

"Bastard! At each and every turn you… as I thought, you're working with the East Branch! This time as well, the East Branch's…"

When he had said that much, the North Branch executive cleared his throat.

"… If a receptionist was attacked, we cannot let this matter slide. I understand. We shall take charge of the investigation into those masks. If you'll kindly leave them with us. But this is a decision of Beim. There is no change on the verdict handed to your party."

The South Branch executive mumbled vexed.

"What a shameless act…"

The Seventh was glad. As I thought, his adventurer hatred was considerable.

『You lot thought you could cut us off to embrace Celes, but that is a

misunderstanding. We’re the ones who cut you off, and bringing Celes to your side is a mistake. She isn’t that sort of human.』

… Monster.

By the words of our founder, the fairytale-esque individuals that entered the stage on the turning points of history. Pulling the blood of the Monster Agrissa, and carrying a Jewel that held her will, Celes had become the new vixen of Bahnseim, scattering death in her wake.

Beim didn’t have an accurate grasp of that.

A common tale, was the extent to which they recognized her. As she rampaged, they thought her scale would always stay as it was.

But that one wouldn’t be satisfied with something on this level. And even if I told them to understand that, it was probably impossible. Only one who’d seen her could understand. And upon seeing her, an average human would be charmed.

I received a verdict from the Guild, and left.

❼

… Bahnseim.

In the audience chamber, the royal line was lined around.

Today, Lyle and Celes’ father Maizel was absent, but the royal prince was laden with a tray of fruit he held up for Celes to eat as she sat on the throne.

Crossing her legs, the girl about to turn fifteen moved with a charm one wouldn’t think to come from such a young body, as she held a small fruit in her mouth.

The ministers lined up around, and her imperial guards were taken by her in fascination.

It was a peculiar sight.

But the greatest peculiarity was the girl curling her back under Celes' feet. Her name was【Remis Zayin】, a former Holy Maiden. While now, she was simply Remis, she still had the attire of a Holy Maiden clad over her body, as she acted as Celes' footrest.

Even so, her expression was one of delight.

"Ah, Celes-sama's body heat is spreading across my back. My goddess…"

Celes smiled at Remis.

"Oh? The Holy Maiden who was once the aspiration of all is satisfied with being my footrest? You don't have any pride, do you."

Remis spoke with a flushed face.

"Yes. I'm satisfied. I'm a woman worthy to be Celes-sama's footrest!"

Driven out of Zayin, and having flowed into Bahnseim, Remis didn't give off the feel of a prideful girl as she had before.

The one watching over such a display was the merchant who'd come from Beim.

(W-what's this. This… no, the atmosphere is just a bit strange. I was surprised to find the former Holy Maiden of Zayin here, but… more importantly, what's that over there?)

Near Celes, were some monsters chained and chokered. But the merchant had never seen such ominous-looking monsters before. What's more, it looked as if Celes had domesticated them.

There, Celes noticed the merchant's line of vision. She stuck an elbow into her armrest, and put her face on her hand. As her pretty blond hair swayed silkily, it looked to the merchant as if it were glittering in the air.

"Are you curious about them? They're, you see… former high priest of Zayin, and his merry friends. They were carrying quite an interesting thing with them, so I asked them to experiment it on themselves. It was amazing. An experiment from long, long ago to

obtain the power of monsters… they never had any success in it before, but they were hiding it, and carrying it along."

Seeing the monster that was once human, the merchant was shocked.

"S-such a thing is possible!?"

Celes laughed.

"Well I don't see why not. I saw them drink the vial myself. Right, Burt?"

The red-haired young man standing back by Celes' side had blue eyes. He was wearing a tailcoat, and he spoke in a rude tone towards his master.

"The one who forced it down their throats was you. Though they looked quite delighted at the end."

Nearby, a girl with long, black hair sat on the floor, her hair hiding away her eyes.In that state, she absentmindedly stared into space.

It was ominous. That girl looked incredibly ominous.

On the peculiar sight, the merchant was sure something was off somewhere. But the talks in Beim had already gotten together around approaching Celes.

Celes tilted her head.

"Anyways, so? What does a merchant from Beim want with me? I won't forgive any boring requests."

The merchant man spoke.

"Yes. Our Beim is a city of trade. We have always lived as a free city state without a presiding lord. For Bahnsim who became our neighbor, we would like to offer our greetings and good will. There isn't a product in the world we don't deal with. And we'd like to see Bahnseim as a regular customer. I am here for those greetings."

Celes looked at the merchant, and grinned.

“I looked through the goods you brought. You had quite some interesting things, and there may come a time for me to make a purchase. But even so, Beim, huh… Remis, that’s where the trash who drove you out lives, right?”

Lightly raising her foot and lowering it on her, Remis felt some pain. But her expression instantly turned to drooling in joy.

“Yes! The hated enemy who drove us out. But now I don’t care about that man anymore. Because I have Celes-sama with me!”

Celes looked delighted.

“I see. You’re adorable, Remis. I’ll keep you around as my footrest for a while more.”

The merchant thought.

(So she does have something against that brother of hers? She did call him trash, after all.)

The Merchant happily informed her.

“Then please rejoice. The adventurer called Lyle, as Beim treasures its bond with you, has been set to be driven out. For Celes-sama’s sake, Beim is…”

After the merchant said that much, Celes stood, carefully stepped over Remis, moved in front of him in an instant, and kicked him off his feet.

The audience chamber… he was kicked all the way to the entrance, and the man didn’t seem to understand what had gone on.

But Celes spoke.

“You compared me… you compared me with that trash? You to put me next to him, and chose me? … I won’t forgive it. I’ll never forgive it. I declare war on Beim! I’ll pound it into the dust. Just who in the world said to compare me to that garbage? It’s unpleasant!”

Celes’ expression was loathsome. It was an expression as if she had just remembered something repulsive. Without any room for

compromise, and without the slightest attempt to conceal her scorn.

(F-for her to kick the messenger… and declare war? Just where did I go wrong?)

The ministers around, and the knights raised their voices. No one went against her.

“Celes-sama, leave that duty to me!”
“No, I shall burn Beim to the ground for you!”
“Judgement on Beim that laid such a discourtesy on Celes-sama!”

And as blood spewed from the merchant’s mouth.

“… I haven’t fed you yet today, have I?”

With those words, Celes looked at her dear pets, the formerly human monsters who had yet to eat a scrap the entire day…

Epilogue

… The East Branch.

There, a personnel change was announced.

The Labyrinth that manifested south of Beim was designated as a managed Labyrinth. The reason being it contained some well-used materials, and despite its low difficulty level, you could find materials you couldn't get in Beim's managed Labyrinth.

The personnel change poster only had a single receptionist's name written in. And it welcomed volunteers.

Seeing her own name filled in, Marianne was a little shocked.

And to her, Tanya's voice called out from behind.

"It's been a while, Marianne. May I have a bit of your time? … Don't be so wary. I've lost the need to lay a hand on you."

Turning around, Marianne subconsciously put herself on guard. Giving a self-deriding smile, Tanya beckoned her towards an unused conference room on the second floor.

The two entered the room to find that it hasn't even been prepared for the early-morning newbie explanatory meeting.

Marianne-san looked at Tanya, and spoke.

"Lost the need to lay a hand, meaning…"

Before she could say it to the end, Tanya crossed her arms, and lowered herself onto a table.

"It was Lyle-kun. In yesterday's announcement from the Guild, he

brought the Sweeper masks along. Saying you were being attacked, and that he saved you. Do it again, and you'll meet the same fate, is likely the message he wanted to get across."

Lyle hadn't just taken out the masks in front of the executives to rile them up. He was indicating that sending Sweepers was pointless.

And the conclusion the Guild came out with was to dispatch a receptionist to the new branch in the south. The receptionist name that rose up was Marianne.

Close to Lyle's party, and they didn't want to keep her anywhere near the internal workings of the Guild. But as they couldn't dispose of her, they were sending her away.

From Marianne's point of view, it was to save Erhart's party. She had raised up a number of parties, but perhaps she found something lovable in them, as Erhart's party was her favorite.

"I'm not against a move to the south. So did you have some business with me?"

Tanya nodded, and stated her business.

"The other branches don't have the leisure to dispatch adventurers south. The sea-based North Branch has circumstances too far removed. Of the West Branch, one first-rate party was completely wiped out, while another has already been determined to transfer south. It seems the Queen of Cartaffs told them to take it up. She really has us by the throats."

The South Branch. As it was mercenary specialized, it was unable to send adventurers. And many mercenary brigades had already left Beim.

The only one left was the East Branch that suffered little casualty.

"Erhart-kun's party will be heading south. He's too close to Lyle-kun to keep… I believe you'll be the one getting the Guild together on that side."

The Labyrinth's scale wasn't large. Even if it were to be managed

from here, it would remain small-time, or so Tanya informed her.

“We’ll take around two more personnel from the Guild. Please hire the rest at the site. Well, in essence, it’s an exile, really. Beim has no interest in its south. For the Magic Stones and materials, it seems some merchants are migrating as well, so please go have a talk with them.”

Hearing that, Marianne questioned it a little. It was as if Beim was being divided up.

(The merchants with the Trēs House at the center. And the Guild personnel… adventurers. It’s as if he’s just cleanly picking away only what he needs… it couldn’t be!)

Marianne felt it was as if a small Beim was being born in the south.

“Tanya, could it be…”

She confirmed her own anxiety with Tanya. Tanya spoke without changing her expression.

“He got us. After investigating, it seems many craftsmen will be moving via the merchants. He’s really completed a mini-Beim for himself. Lyle-kun… I really don’t want to think this was all by his expectations.”

Marianne didn’t think Lyle had been moving about at random.

Sucking up funds from Beim, then the favorably factioned merchants and the craftsmen… and it felt as if he’s stolen the adventurers and the relevant knowhow from the Guild.

That sensation as if they were dancing on the palm of his hands made the two of them fear him…

❼

… Rauno had come to the southern base set up for Labyrinth Subjugation.

Whenever a Labyrinth was to be cleared, everyone would set up a

base outside, but it was only natural for Beim to establish it to the level of a small town.

But those organized districts held a skillfulness as if there was a plan for a town to be there from the start.

Leading small Innis along, Rauno matched her pace as they walked the streets.

“What a lonely land. If you call it a base for Labyrinth Subjugation, it should be more a place for the squalid singer, and the invitation of harlots. If it doesn’t have a crude feel to it, it’s not interesting at all.”

If you walked the town, you’d take in the smell of food from the stalls, and in the bars, the adventurers who’d pulled out of the Labyrinth made merry regardless of night or day.

Harlots would try to draw in customers, and adventurers making lewd glances at them was a standard sight. But there was none of that here. There was nothing.

Grasping Rauno’s hand, Innis spoke.

“How was your homeland?”

Rauno scratched his head with his spare right.

“… My last boss wasn’t there. Seems he retired. He wasn’t one to be loyal to her majesty, he was of the old king’s time after all. There weren’t many left who I recognized.”

Taking care of the dirty work, Rauno had pretty much been driven out of Cartaffs. And he had come to hate his job.

He had a Skill to infiltrate anywhere. So jobs unbefitting a knight were pushed on him, and he was looked down on by his surroundings.

For him to continue fulfilling his duty was only loyalty to his country. But the words the previous king had bestowed upon him…

‘The shame of Cartaffs’ Knights.’

… They were.

“It seems that Queen’s different from her straight-laced predecessor, but… I wonder.”

Innis strongly gripped his hand.

“Rauno-san, you want to go back to being a knight, don’t you?”

He gave a bitter smile.

“Does it look that way? No, if you’re the one saying it, I’m sure I do. That may be it. Maybe I want to be recognized as a knight. There was a time even I held onto immature ideals, or so I’ve come to think these days.”

Those naïve ideals were still somewhere in him, he noticed as he told it to Innis.

“Anyways, Innis… did you get the information?”

On Rauno’s serious voice, Innis nodded.

“And what was the result?”

Innis spoke in a low voice so only Rauno could hear.

“Lyle-san plans on using Beim. In the end, he will be exiled, and the world will treat it as if he lost. But the four-country alliance and Cartaffs… they have a piece in it all. They’re sure his exile was a skillful means to escape the city.”

“Escape from what? From Celes of Bahnseim?”

Innis shook her head.

“Various things. If he stayed in Beim as a hero, Lyle-san’s movements would be heavily restricted. I’m sure it will be easier for him to travel lighter from now on. It seems Lyle-san was against receiving full support from Beim. And what split Beim in two was…”

At that moment, a voice called over to the two of them.

It was Novem, doing her shopping.

“Innis-san, and Rauno-san as well. So you made it here?”

With a voice calling from behind, Rauno answered with an indifferent attitude.

“Yeah, that’s right. Because I can earn more if I stick with my valued customer over here. You’ll continue using our services, right? I want to set up an office, but would there happen to be an open space anywhere?”

The reason he had come south was to chase after Lyle. It wasn’t because he was a customer. It was because Innis had foreseen the ruin of Beim.

Novem brought her left hand to her mouth, and giggled.

“That’s a huge help. I’ll prepare one at once. If you have any specific wishes, I’ll dispatch someone to assist, so please say it at the time. Fare thee well.”

As Novem parted from the two of them, Innis gripped Rauno’s hand even stronger. Rauno looked at her, and found she was a little frightened.

“What’s wrong?”

“… It’s just a probability, but Novem-san was keeping an eye on us.”

Innis was wary of Novem.

“To that great an extent? She didn’t have that sort of…”

Innis spoke.

“That person will do anything if it’s for Lyle-san’s sake. That’s the sort of person she is. And I’m scared. When I look at that person, it’s as if I feel something nostalgic… I’m sorry, please pay it no mind.”

Rauno scratched his head, before leading Innis back to the inn…

7

… Roland entered the developing port on a Trēs House ship.

To meet the one taking command, future Grand Duke of Galleria, Leold.

Making way for Leold's room at the most splendid building of the port, Roland took out the arbitrarily sent notification.

Since he wasn't in public, Leold wore a casual short and trouser, as he worked through paperwork.

When Roland entered the room, some tea was prepared for a break.

Once an employee brought the tea, Leold wrapped up his work, and kept Roland company. But his bearing was rude.

Roland wondered if he was being belittled as he politely started into talks.

"I have dropped by in regards to the letter delivered to Beim. The Grand Duke Proxy stated you were the one with the right to decide, and would say no further, so I've directly come to pay a visit. Please tell me. Why have you one-sidedly decided to break off all dealings with the Trēs House? You haven't forgotten how much aid we've given you in this endeavor, have you?"

Leold looked at Roland as he took the cup to his mouth, and sipped a bit of tea. And after parting it from his mouth, he held the cup in both hands.

"… We're honoring the contents of the contract. The one we contracted was the settlement south of Beim, was it? With Fidel-dono there and the Trēs House he served acting as representative. We definitely did not contract the taken-over Trēs House. Which means to say, we do not recognize your claim."

Showing a bit of fatigue, Leold's shirt sleeves were stained with ink from all the paperwork. His hands were a little darkened as well.

There were bags under his eyes.

"Beim has officially recognized the Trēs House as having been inherited. If you don't call this a breach of the contract, I've no words

to return.”

Leold-kun replied nonchalantly.

“Whether Beim recognized it or not… it doesn’t really matter. The four-country alliance is formally planning to protest Beim after all. Brother-in-… I mean, Lyle-dono was handed an exile from practically nothing but false charges, causing us to doubt their credibility. And more than anything, you who exiled your relatives to take over the house lacks credibility as well.”

Roland stood from the sofa, and spoke in a face of surprise.

“Are you thinking to make an enemy of Beim? It’s true you’ve joined four hands, and I’ve heard you’ve build a cooperative relation, but even so, every year…”

“… Yes, every year, we purchased goods at Beim. Well, they were mainly weapons and the like, but Magic Stones as well. However, our situation has already changed. War is on a sharp decline. What we need isn’t tools of war, but tools to make our lives abundant. We’ll need a fixed amount of weapons, but we can produce that much ourselves. Did you know? By driving out several merchant houses, you’ve forced a number of craftsmen who’d lost their place to flow to the alliance. Lyle-dono has voiced a desire to offer them a warm welcome, and we for one will answer to our benefactor.”

Roland hung his head.

He was regretting the Trēs House’s loss of credibility at his hands. But by the time Roland had learned of Gina’s plan, it was too late to turn back.

And living while glared at by Beim’s conference of merchants, to the Beim-raised Roland, it wasn’t something he could imagine.

“… Can you give us rights to use your port?”

Leold spoke.

“I’ve no such intentions. The four country alliance shall support south of Beim. Our future dealings will be centered around there.”

Roland, in regards to those words.

“It seems you are underestimating the power of Beim. How many years do you think it will take for a small port town to develop in the south? You say you can make a living without any trade in that timeframe?”

Leold spoke.

“You’re the one making underestimations. It’s a fact that Beim is a prominent metropolis of the continent. I doubt there’s a product you can’t obtain in that city. But by looking down on its surroundings like that, it should learn how hatred builds up.”

Roland looked at Leold’s eyes, and faltered a little. He had worked a majority of his time within Beim, and he had few chances to venture out to other lands.

And the first look directed straight at him from the outside world made him swallow his breath.

Leold instantly reverted his expression, and spoke to Roland.

“Go home. We have no need to follow the decisions of Beim out here, and we don’t have such plans.”

Roland left the room, and mulled over how he would explain it at the next conference of merchants. Only on the prerequisites of handing over interest in the port, had Roland been recognized as the Trēs House’s head.

Once that was lost, he hadn’t the slightest idea what they would say.

Roland decided to swiftly return, and set up countermeasures with Gina…

❼

… On the land that had become the front most line with Beim, Blois spat out a sigh.

What he was to pass on from Bahnseim was, no matter how you

looked at it, Pandora's Box. There was no doubt some portion of that merchant's body was in the box, and the situation had come down to him delivering it to Beim alongside a declaration of war.

Confirming the letter in his office, he found it contained orders to prepare to invade Beim.

His adjutant knight looked at him and spoke.

"General, I can understand why you may not be on board, but we must abide royal orders."

Before the earnest knight, Blois sat deeply into his seat, and lifted up the papers in one hand.

"It's impossible. Impossible, I say. A Beim invasion… I don't feel we'll lose, but how many troops and goods do you think that would require? On top of them having built that troublesome fortress, the final objective is attacking that metropolis of Beim. You'll need a legion of one to two hundred thousand, I tell you. Prepare all by ourselves? That isn't happening. Now I have to go crying to someone."

Blois couldn't decide whether it was good or bad that the merchant of Beim hadn't returned alive.

(Well, rather than returning with their hearts stolen, maybe it's a better result for the poor man. Better than laying low in Beim, and betraying his friends and family, at least.)

The merchant who's gone to see Celes, brimming with confidence, had returned in a different shape entirely. Whatever remained of his well-rounded body fit in a box he could hold in one hand.

The knight spoke in worry.

"If you ignore orders, you can't avoid execution."

Blois gave a sigh.

"I know that. But the practical problem here is how the area's rule has divided people, and we're lacking in hands. I can only explain the present situation, and seek help."

The knight looked at Blois.

“If it’s you, general, wouldn’t you be able to conquer it? You did say there wasn’t much of a need to fear Beim before, didn’t you?”

Hearing that knight’s words, Blois offered a revision.

“Dude, you’d do well to remember a bit of the details. It’s as if you’re saying Beim is nothing special.”

“I’m wrong?”

“You’re wrong. If we’re going to war as the premise. And Beim has never even thought to expand its territory, so there’s no way they’ll be invading from their side. Well, firing people up and causing wars is the extent they go for. Then worming their way in with commerce and such, they’re skilled in seduction, and using the back door, and that sort of thing. They’re more formidable of an enemy in times of peace. But if you fight them, you can definitely win.”

Saying that Blois showed the knight a certain document.

It was the mercenary brigade he had hired to compensate his lack of hands. Even upon seeing that, the knight didn’t seem to understand it.

“Something about them?”

“… Formerly a mercenary brigade enrolled at Beim’s South Guild Branch. During Beim’s defensive, it seems they were tasked with protecting the important points. Their scale large, and their quality isn’t bad. But they’re mercenaries.”

If hired, they’d join either side. And you could even say they had full knowledge of Beim. They knew how much treasure was in the city, and to them, it was a place easy to fight in.

“The city of merchants and mercs… it’s going to fall.”

With those words, Blois prepared a letter addressed to the royal palace at the center. An explanation of the present situation, and a request for reinforcements…

❼

Within the Jewel.

LYLE, who'd come from my room of memories, was talking with the ancestors.

『If it isn't garters, I'd have to say stockings.』

Hearing that, the Third compared me and LYLE with a serious face.

『I see… so Lyle had a foot fetish all this time? I happen to prefer behinds.』

I to him.

"Please don't start up on your sexual preferences. Are you not embarrassed?"

The Third laughed.

『When I'm already dead? Rather, this sort of thing is vital. It's important to know yourself. Isn't it fine? Being a foot-fetishist?』

"Don't arbitrarily label me a foot fetishist!"

When I cried out, the Seventh followed through.

『That's right! Considering Lyle's eye level up to now, I've already concluded him a lover of large breasts. He keeps taking glances at them, so there's no doubt about it. So if you call him a foot-fetishist, even Lyle will get angry, Third Generation Head.』

Come so far, I just realized the Jewel displayed things from my point of view, felt embarrassed, and sat on the spot.

LYLE didn't stand up for me.

『But I like Vera's chan's chest that seems to be non-existent, but surely exists. I want to rub my face against the part of her thighs you can see between her skirt and socks!』

"You really are the worst."

As I said that, the Fifth looked at me.

『Lyle, I can only see it as you shouting complaints at a mirror. Just accept it. That's the first step.』

I didn't want to recognize this pervy brat as myself. When I thought that, Milleia-san gently placed a hand on my shoulder.

She held up her thumb.

『Fret not, Lyle. I had Miranda buy some clothes besides garters as well. Just like me, that girl has a nice body on her.』

Before I could deny it, the Seventh opened his mouth.

『Hahaha, though your chest size couldn't be any more different. Aunty's dubious sizing can't… ow!』

From her fluttery sleeve, she swiftly pulled out a one-shot gun, and shot him.

Since we were in the Jewel, it ended with nothing but an ow. In real life, it was an exceedingly outrageous scene.

『Brod-kun, did I teach you it was alright to say such things to a woman? Good grief, you haven't changed a bit.』

I had some interest in the Seventh's past, but to change the topic, I turned talks to Beim.

"More importantly, with this, Beim has divided as planned. Even if one is crushed, we have a spare, but… will I really go off on a journey just like that?"

Before we could show Bahnseim our movements, I was to go through the four country alliance, and Bahnseim through Cartaffs, finally heading to Faunbeux from there.

The Third shrugged his shoulders as he sat on the table.

『There's no helping it. We need the power of Faunbeax and the other surrounding countries at all costs. If you give them a letter form the alliance and Cartaffs, it will add to your persuasive power, so don't worry. Well, the problem is how Faunbeux is a huge Walt

hater, I guess.』

The Seventh had revived, clearing his throat, and ignoring the Third's gaze. The kingdom of Faunbeux… they had fought with Bahnseim a number of times, and had suffered a crushing defeat and lost much land twice by Walt Hands.

Right now, they held land of around two third their golden age. The one who shaved off the extra third was the Walt House.

What's more, the Seventh was heavily involved. When an army of Faunbeax was rejoicing over a victory, he had beaten them, and driven them back. Nabbing some land while he was at it.

So when it came to the house there, we were nothing but enemies.

Within that, the Fifth stood from his seat.

He looked at the silver weapons floating above the round table.

The First's giant sword.

The Second's bow.

The Fourth's dagger.

The Sixth's halberd.

Those four glowing weapons were suspended in air, and after a light breath, the Fifth spoke.

『… Lyle, before your journey, I'll teach you my last Skill. Map, Dimension. And finally, 【Real Map】. It can show the surrounding terrain as a three dimensional map, and you can read off the finest of movements. It's a Skill where you can shift the viewpoint to any place you'd like to see. Well, it's convenient for travel, so it's just right.』

The Fifth said that with a resolved face, so I felt a little sorrowful at how he was finally going to entrust me his Skills.

An animal lover, and with many children, he was always cold to them, a man who left a large problem for the house.

Differing from the image handed down, he was a person who always looked somewhat unmotivated. Of smaller build within the house, and a person that giant Sixth Generation wasn't able to beat to the end.

"Understood. Let's move to your room of memories."

Saying that, I stood. The Third looked down, while the Seventh watched me and the Fifth with a serious face. And yet…

『… Why are you arbitrarily pushing things along over there? I'll just throw this out, but as the guide, I hold a higher authority in this Jewel than father, you know? I won't let him disappear just like that. 』

As I turned to Milleia-san, LYLE folded his hands behind his head.

『Right, I knew I should have told Lyle about that earlier.』

The Fifth pointed at Milleia-san.

『You lot! What are you saying! I don't have anything left to hand down to Lyle…』

There, Milleia-san corrected her posture with a serious face, and turned back to him.

『Sure you do. Don't you father? Lyle should know what you had to endure. It's a fact he has no choice but to know if he's going to aim for emperor… and for Lyle to learn of you, I do not recognize the inheritance of your Skill.』

The Fifth's Skill inheritance was prevented by Milleia-san…